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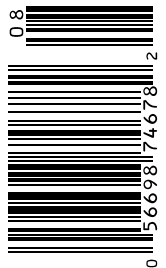
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TO
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FREE

How to rebuke death
and love your neighbor,
in a pandemic and beyond.

by Julie Polter

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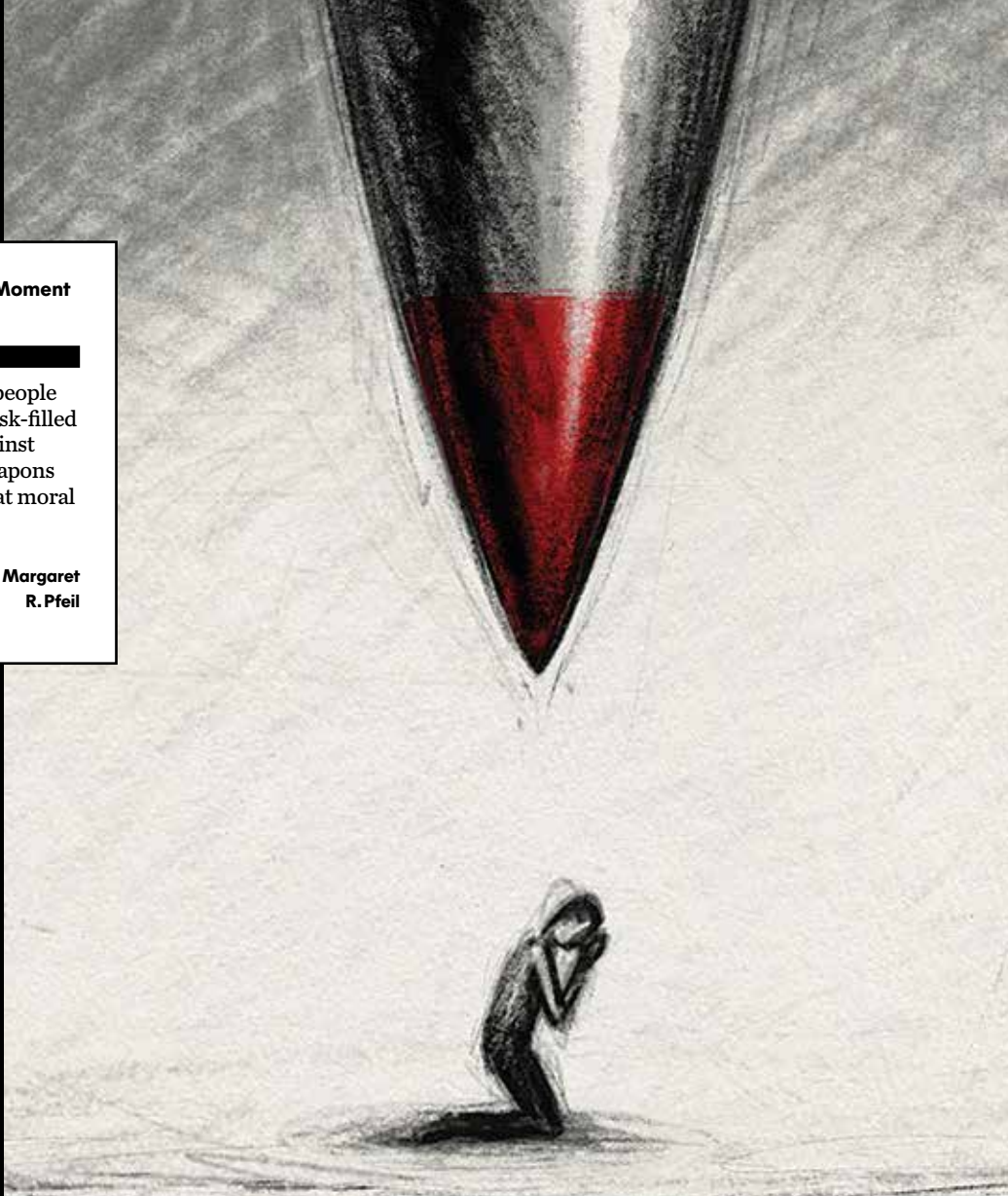
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"I USED TO BELIEVE IN A JUST WAR, BUT I DON'T ANYMORE."

A Nuclear Moment of Truth

How have people who take risk-filled actions against nuclear weapons come to that moral choice?

by Margaret
R. Pfeil



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Yearning to Breathe Free Breathe out. Breathe in. Before the coronavirus, some people did that without a second thought; others struggled to breathe at all.

by Julie
Polter

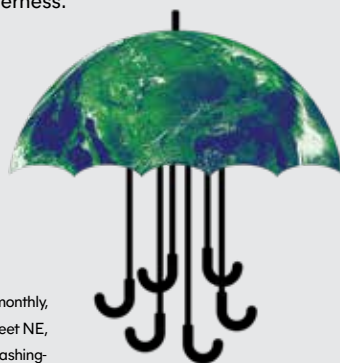
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Harboring a Culture of Hate The U.S. Catholic Church, once persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan, today has a visible white-power faction.

by Eric
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From the Editor

We're clearly not yet in a post-pandemic world, and almost everyone seems well-disillusioned of any pretense that we live in a "post-racial" time. But, as Julie Polter explains in her cover essay, the COVID-19 pandemic—and the worldwide protests in response to the other pandemic of police brutality and systematized racism—has led to actions once thought unimaginable. From NASCAR to the Southern Baptist Convention, a surprisingly wide range of people and institutions seem suddenly aware of their own complicity in symbols and structures of injustice—and more and more white people express their recognition that police brutality isn't, after all, the isolated behavior of a few "bad apples." It remains to be seen whether this new awareness results in real change, and whether it lasts beyond the current electric moment. And skeptics can be forgiven for not trusting that genuine transformation will occur, since we've seen these patterns again and again, usually followed by a backlash and retrenchment to the status quo.

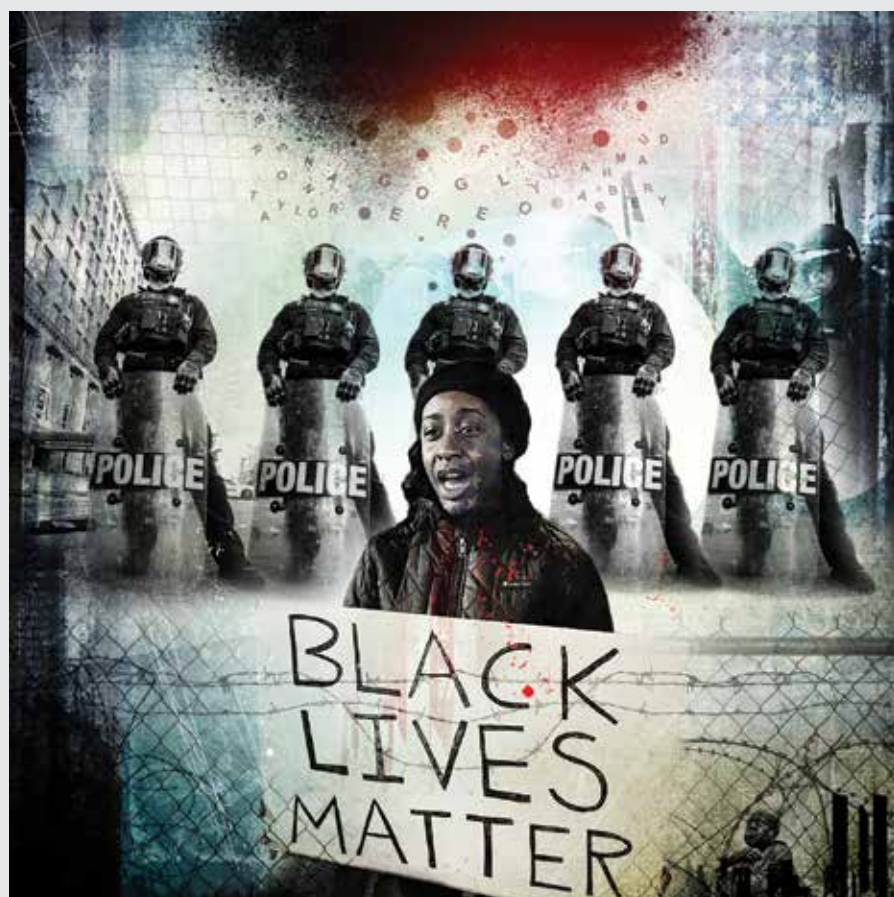
Christians, of course, are by definition believers in "genuine transformation," and the church has an instrumental role to play. One pastor, acknowledging the raised consciousness, said that "everyone in my congregation took one step" in awareness and action. One step will not eradicate 400 years of structured racism in this country. But that's how every journey begins.

RESPONSE

Let It Go?

In "The Legacy of the White Lion" (July 2020), Kelly Brown Douglas called Christians to pursue reparations that "compensate for past harms" and lead "to a just future." "I find it absurd to think we can change almost anything with money," replied Peggy Stott [f](#). "We need to let the past go and totally change the future." Others disagreed: "We can't just ignore how, on the whole, white people in this country have a leg up today due to what happened in the past," said Virginia Gracen [f](#). "We don't ask or expect trauma survivors to let the past go," noted Boshears Rhonda [f](#); we help them "heal, and move forward, but not forget."

Write us: response@sojo.net



"I NEED A LOVE THAT IS TROUBLED BY INJUSTICE."

Austin Channing Brown

Author, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*

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Faith-Marie Zambélé

Sojourners culture columnist Faith-Marie Zambélé likens her writing style to a favorite pastime: thrifting. Both place “disparate items into conversation with each other,” she explains, describing her column (p. 42) as a “cabinet of cultural curios with a dash of criticism.” Zambélé, who grew up near Chicago and now lives in New Haven where she’s studying at the Yale School of Drama, says when words fail, she turns to music and dancing—“They fill in the sensory gaps of human experience.”



Eric Martin

While protesting white supremacy in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017, Catholic Worker Eric Martin observed an “absence of Catholic clergy” in interfaith resistance movements. When the U.S. Catholic bishops later released “harmful statements on race,” Martin began investigating Catholic factions in white supremacist groups (p. 34). Martin teaches at the Center for the Study of Religion at UCLA.

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23,040

Average number of breaths taken daily by a healthy adult

6

Minimum number of slow, deep breaths shown to significantly reduce blood pressure

20

Percent reduction in new asthma cases in LA-area children linked to two-decade improvement in air quality

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The mission of *Sojourners* magazine is to inspire hope and action by articulating the biblical call to racial and social justice, life and peace, and environmental stewardship.

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HEARTS & MINDS

BY JIM WALLIS

THE VIRUS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

A white cop's knee on the neck of a Black man revealed the old and ongoing pandemic underneath the current pandemic. The coronavirus had already laid bare the systems of racial injustice that accelerate the spread of sickness and death among people of color—the fundamental racial disparities in health care, economics, housing, education, and every other institution in America. Structural racism was exposed as a precondition for getting and dying from COVID-19; white supremacy is the virus that has made America's soul sick for 400 years and continues to kill Black people.

Over the last weekend in May, including Pentecost Sunday, Sojourners helped organize faith communities to lament the first 100,000 COVID dead in this country. We were joined by Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters in their services, and we helped unite Christian

“THE WHITE KNEE ON A BLACK NECK IS A SYSTEM, A CULTURE, A FALSE IDOL, AND A BRUTAL VIOLENCE THAT PERMEATES EVERY ASPECT OF AMERICAN LIFE.”

“WHAT ARE WHITE PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY WHITE CHRISTIANS, WILLING TO RISK?”

families across all our divisions—mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Pentecostal, Catholic, Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American Christian leaders and their congregations—in honoring and memorializing those who died from the virus in only three months, many of them separated from their loved ones. On June 1, we were joined by mayors from more than 60 cities who, with interfaith clergy, announced a Day of Mourning and Lament.

Just before that weekend, a white Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee against George Floyd’s neck for almost nine minutes in front of cameras and, ultimately, the whole world. We all heard Floyd say “I can’t breathe” as life was squeezed out of him, sparking weeks of protests that filled the streets of Minneapolis, the rest of the country, and the world, with millions of people calling for justice.

I have never seen so many white people involved in the movement to confront America’s original sin

of racism and its many consequences. Many white people are learning what Black people already know: that the white knee on a Black neck is a system, a culture, a false idol, and a brutal violence that permeates every aspect of American life and structures.

The scale and energy of these protests are inextricably linked to the ongoing pandemic that is taking a vastly disproportionate toll on Black and brown people, in both health and economic impacts. Even in this period of lockdowns and social distancing, people of all races flooded the streets, risking their lives and livelihoods to confront racialized law enforcement and to stand up for the life and dignity of Black and brown people.

The public health risks stemming from structural racism are even more dangerous than the coronavirus to people of color, and they are deeply embedded in nearly every aspect of U.S. society. The question before us is: What are white people—especially white Christians—willing to risk to secure safety, health, and equity for their brothers and sisters of color?

In the months ahead, and in post-election America, we will learn what the growing awareness will mean and how much it will lead to change. I believe that faith communities across the country must play a vital role in those changes and that the battle ahead can be rightly called “spiritual warfare” with “forces of wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12). It’s time to fasten on the “whole armor of God” to engage in that spiritual warfare. ✦



Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of *Sojourners* magazine.



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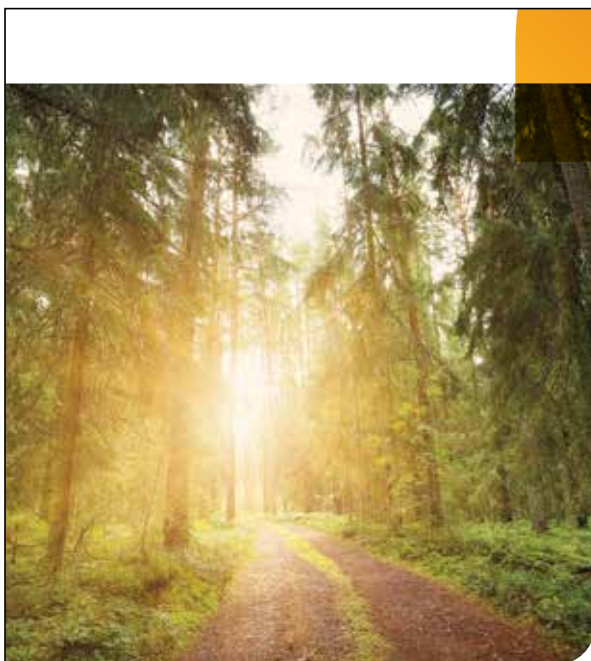
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OUR MASTER CLASS ON GRIEF

How can we live now in a way that our future selves—and generations to come—will look back with gratitude?



2

While we were not strangers to grief before the pandemic, these months have been something of a master class. “Each person’s grief is as unique as their fingerprint,” writes grief counselor David Kessler. “But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed.” We are witnesses to one another’s grief.

In our witness, we must acknowledge that loss is not equally distributed. Those of us with privilege have allowed this to happen, and we have much to answer for before God; there is so much that we must work to change. And we don’t have all the time in the world.

I hear empathic grief in parents who can’t spare their children the sudden disruption of their lives and the loss of rites of passage for which they have spent years preparing. And I hear it in children of elder parents who are sick with worry, and in family members of those deemed essential workers who, by choice or compulsion, risk their lives each day. I hear it in the business owners doing everything they can to keep employees on the payroll; in teachers, caregivers, advocates, and in my fellow clergy.

Grief propels us to do whatever we can to make things better and to offer hope and meaning for those we love. Spouses stand outside nursing-home windows with signs that say “I love you”; lines of cars drive by the house of a child celebrating a birthday or graduation; concerts are organized via Instagram; volunteer networks provide food and essential supplies to undocumented families. This is grief mobilized for good, helping us to do something to redeem the time we’re in.

We all have our stories to remember when the pandemic has passed—not that we got through it, but *how*—how we loved and cared for each other, how our hearts were broken open, and how we resolved to change things. Poet David Whyte asks: How can you live *now* such that your future self, and all who come after you, will look back with gratitude? How, in other words, can you become now the blessed saint of your future memory?

In John’s gospel, Jesus speaks of himself as a shepherd who calls us each by name and whom we follow because we recognize his voice. He also speaks of himself as a gate through which we enter and find salvation. “Whoever enters by me will be saved ... I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly,” he said.

Where and how do you need to be saved? What would it look like and how would it feel to experience being saved now? It’s a risky question to ask. But if we don’t ask it, how can we enter a conversation with the one who calls himself our Good Shepherd, and who promises salvation in our lives as they *are* and our world *as it is*?

This is what salvation looks like for me: when Jesus comes to me as the whispering voice, the presence of divine love. And when Jesus encourages me and teaches me in a way of love that is merciful, forgiving, sacrificial, and universal. I believe that salvation is deeply personal, but not individual. “We will walk into the Kingdom of God together,” wrote the Jesuit priest and activist Daniel Berrigan, “or we won’t walk in at all.”

We are closest to Jesus and most like him in our grief for those we love in their suffering. That’s what propelled him to the cross—his love and his grief for us all. This grief propels us to take on, gladly, whatever is needed to make things better, to wrench whatever meaning we can from

**“GRIEF PROPELS US
TO DO WHATEVER WE CAN
TO MAKE THINGS BETTER.”**

this ruined house *for love’s sake*.

Followers of Jesus are not immune to human suffering, nor are we spared anxiety or grief. He never promised us that. In fact, he prepared us for the exact opposite—that like him, ours would be the way of the cross, which is the way of salvation *through* suffering, not around it. In our master class on grief, he is the master teacher. ❖

Mariann Edgar Budde is bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. This excerpt is from a sermon she delivered in May.

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COMMENTARY

BY ERIC L. MCDANIEL



WHY ARE PEOPLE DYING TO GO TO CHURCH?

Most Americans oppose opening churches too soon.
But some believe God offers them special protection.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most Americans have respected government directives to keep in place and avoid participating in large gatherings. Now, several months into this crisis, governors are loosening restrictions or expanding exemptions, including for religious institutions. An April poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 77 percent of Americans oppose such loosening.

However, there is a contingent of Americans openly opposing self-isolation policies, especially among the religious community. A third of white evangelical Protestants support loosening restrictions, and their pastors have thumbed their noses at health and safety restrictions. Even in April, President Trump was pushing hard to have churches packed by Easter, in contradiction to the directions of public health authorities.

Why are so many willing to risk their lives—and the lives of others—to attend a worship service? For centuries, a sector of American Christianity has believed itself to be citizens of “God’s special nation,” and they are willing to risk contracting the potentially deadly COVID-19 to prove they are God’s chosen.

Americans are outliers regarding levels of religious fervor. As income and industrialization increase in nations, religiosity is expected to decrease—the U.S. is the exception and the most religious nation (by statistics) among its industrialized counterparts. Religion is so deeply entwined with American culture that a 2015 PRRI poll found that two-thirds of Americans agree that believing in God was very or somewhat

important to being truly American.

It is not just that Americans place higher importance on religion or are more likely to attend worship services. They are also more likely to believe in a God who is actively involved in history. A 2017 Pew Research Center poll found that three-fourths of Americans believe God or a higher power has protected them, while two-thirds believe they have been rewarded by God.

Since the early American colonies, the idea of America as the “New Israel” or “God’s special place for God’s special people” has been imprinted in white American culture. A 2016 PRRI poll found 57 percent of Americans agreed that God granted America a special role in human history. Those who extol the idea of the U.S. as a divine nation argue it took on huge risks throughout history and was victorious every time because God willed it to be.

This is a direct reflection of predeterminism, which argues “health and wealth” will be given to the faithful, while poverty and sickness are the consequences of sin. Such distorted theology fosters a false sense of national innocence that disregards the nation’s failures and the costs of these “successes.” It disregards historical facts—such as the U.S. defeating the British due to funding from the French and a weakened British army rather than by divine providence—to fit a predetermined myth. This same thinking leads to a refusal to acknowledge atrocities such as chattel slavery and the genocide of Native Americans, which were critical in making the nation’s economy one of the world’s largest.

This false sense of innocence leads to attributing suffering, such as poverty or illness, to moral failings. Because only sinners are poor and sick, God’s chosen have no responsibility to help them, so the thinking goes. Though antithetical to the gospel message, those engaged in this ideology fully embody the saying, “What God has for me, is for me.”

The pastors who openly defy stay-in-place orders or reopening guidelines are doing so out of the misplaced belief that God protects the favored and cares little about risks these behaviors pose to others. By openly disobeying protective directions and increasing their own and others’ risk of exposure to COVID-19, they attempt to demonstrate to their congregants that they too are favored, just like the nation. ♦

Eric L. McDaniel, a PRRI public fellow, teaches at the University of Texas.

I

DRAFTING WOMEN IS NOT PROGRESS

In March, the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service sent recommendations to Congress for changes to the Selective Service System, the military draft. For people of conscience, the issues at the heart of our concern were the expansion of Selective Service and the draft and protection of the rights of conscientious objectors (COs). Conscientious objectors are defined by the Defense Department as those with “a firm, fixed, and sincere objection to participation in war in any form or the bearing of arms, by reason of religious training and/or belief.” Some consider draft registration to be participation in war and a violation of their conscience.

During the commission’s two years of public hearings and debate, religious communities and peace organizations advocated for the commission to recommend that the Selective Service System be put into deep standby, as it was between 1975 and 1980. Short of that, we advocated for a process for COs to make their objection to war known at the time of registration with a “CO check-off box.” The commission ultimately rejected that option, stating that though it “would probably require minimal expense,” it would cause “confusion, during a draft, for those who indicated their intent to file for conscientious objector status.”

Though religious and civil society organizations argued vigorously for abolition of the draft as the best way to protect rights of conscience, the commission instead recommended extending the burden to women. In its final report, the commission claims not only that women have a valuable contribution to make toward national security, but also that women’s participation in the draft is for *women’s* own benefit: “That women register, and perhaps be called up in the event of a draft, is a necessary prerequisite for their achieving equality



as citizens, as it has been for other groups historically discriminated against in American history.”

This would seem to us less an argument for equality than one for complicity in militarism. It implies that women will attain gender equality by being forced to register for the draft and participate in militarism, as the commission asserts was the case for “other groups historically discriminated against,” likely referring to discrimination by white people against people of color.

People of color serve in the U.S. military in disproportionate numbers and have served in every war since the nation’s founding. Military participation has *not* led to equality. On the contrary, history and our modern world are full of examples of Black and brown veterans and service members who are denied the rights and equality enjoyed by their white counterparts.

During U.S. drafts, tens of thousands of COs, many still living and now approaching or well past retirement age, performed an involuntary term of service, just like all others who were drafted. But because the service they performed was nonviolent, they are denied the benefits and equality the commission promises. Their discrimination is based not on race or gender, but on religion and belief.

The commission report was released in the middle of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Its disproportionate focus on militarism and nationalism, predicated on—and wholly uncritical of—the use of military force as a legitimate foreign policy tool, amounts to a lost opportunity when such a pandemic has laid bare the powerlessness of a \$738 billion military budget against a deadly and virulent disease. While our culture of militarism exists and while the legitimacy of military violence goes unchallenged, true equality for all is unattainable. ❖

**“MILITARY
 PARTICIPATION
 HAS NOT LED TO
 EQUALITY FOR
 PEOPLE OF COLOR.”**

Maria Santelli is executive director of the Center on Conscience and War.

SURVIVAL IS A GROUP PROJECT

3



Almost from the first day of the COVID-19 crisis, the question in the back of many minds has been: How soon will this be over? When can we get back to normal?

For irresponsible people, the answer has been: Now. Schooled by a lifetime in a consumer society, deprivation of any kind seems impossible, hence the pictures of people demanding, sometimes at gunpoint, that the barber shop or sports bar be opened back up.

For more responsible souls, the answer has been: Once we have enough tests. Or once we have good treatments for the coronavirus. Or once we have a vaccine.

But the real answer, in some sense, may be never.

Because, of course, this pandemic is just one crisis buried within a much larger one: the reaction of the natural world to the demands placed on it by a species making unprecedented demands.

**“THE STARTING PLACE IS
TO SURRENDER OUR HOPE
THAT WE WILL SIMPLY RETURN
TO SOME OLD NORMAL.”**

We've fooled ourselves into thinking stability is the norm—those of us who grew up in the relatively placid years and in relatively placid places in the latter part of the 20th century can perhaps be forgiven our expectation that placidity would mark our whole lives. But those particular lives in those particular places have generated so much change that stability is no longer a possibility. In particular, our prosperity burned so much fossil fuel that we decisively shifted the chemistry of the atmosphere, setting ourselves up for a century—probably many centuries—of chronic instability punctuated by acute crisis. Even increasing the temperature a single degree Celsius has been enough to fundamentally shake the planet: more and bigger storms, fires, droughts. And we're on track to raise the temperature three times that much—which would mean far more than three times the damage, since the consequences are increasing exponentially, not linearly. That's what "tipping point" means.

Job one, of course, is to limit that rise: If we do everything right, we may be able to stop just shy of 2 degrees, which will be a great human accomplishment, but a far worse world than the present.

So job two is to develop the mindset that helps us deal. I think we will find ourselves less fixated on growth, and more on security, safety, resilience. Growth is largely an individual process, all of us pursuing our own self-interest. But these other goals can only be accomplished by communities—local, national, global—that focus less on competition and more on cooperation. Unless you're willing to indulge in prepper hoarding fantasies (and no Christian rightly can—we're the people who've been told to love our neighbors), then survival is a group project. And when the threats are planetary in scale, that group by necessity is large.

But the starting place is to surrender our hope that we will simply return to some old normal. We've got to move forward, with a new kind of nimbleness. Together. ☒

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org and a *Sojourners* contributing editor, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*



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UNDER THE SUN

BY JEANIA REE V. MOORE

BORN AGAIN THROUGH MEMORIES



Last summer, I started composting. What began as an economical exercise focused on reduction became, over time, a relationship based on generosity and gift. When COVID-19 interrupted my weekly routine of dropping off food scraps, I realized with a jolt that composting felt less like an act of frugality and more like bringing tribute. Unexpectedly, through composting, I had entered into relationship with the earth—and this was a recovery of something long forgotten. As Robin Wall Kimmerer urges us to remember in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, we exist in reciprocity with the more-than-human world.

This remembrance parallels a tactile memory I experienced last winter while running my hands through a bowl of dried black-eyed peas. The feel of the beans, almost like coins, merged with images of large, elementary numerals in my head and movement, like an abacus, from one side to another—a flash so quick and wordless I could not be sure. When it happened again a few months later, I remembered: This is how I learned to count. My grandmother—a foundational figure alive for my first 18 years—taught me to count with beans.

Memory is a strange and powerful thing. Most days, I can barely

**“MEMORY BELIES EXTINCTION,
CHANGES THE AIR, AND
REMAKES RELATIONSHIPS.”**

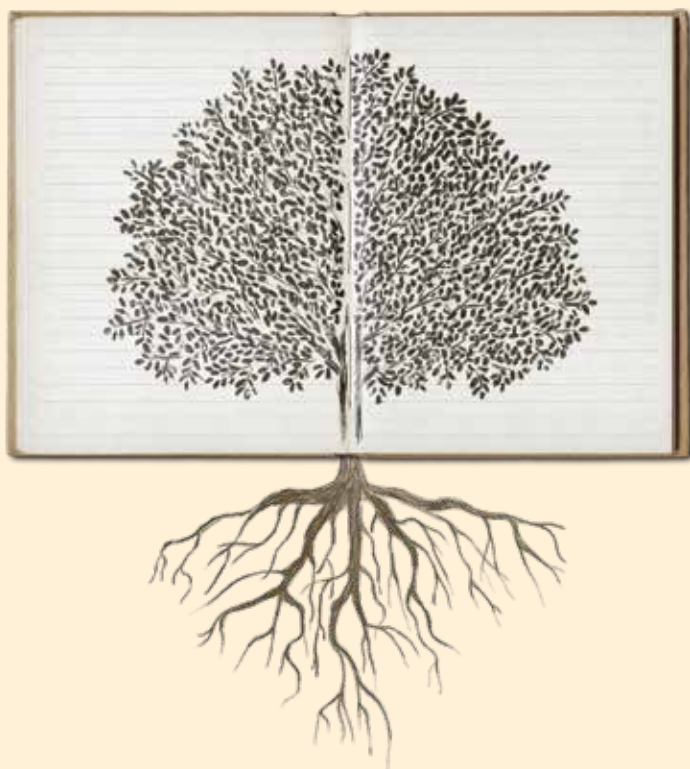
remember what happened two weeks ago. However, these memories—one gradual, the other immediate—recalled to me primordial truths of my being and belonging in the world as a creature made from soil and a grandmother’s love. They were similar to a recent encounter I had with my favorite preschool teacher after almost 25 years. As an adult standing in the presence of this woman who was a best friend to 5-year-old me for half of my young life, I felt utterly known and buffeted by love.

Memory brought me back into relationship with people, places, and selves long gone from my life.

This function of memory resonates as I consider the road ahead. The specter of loss looms in apocalypse as a constituent feature of our inner and outer worlds. Appropriately, much of our COVID conversation centers on recuperation: How to save, recover, restore. As a follower of Jesus (Yeshua, “God saves”), I know that saving is also necessary *of* us, not just by us. As someone profoundly shaped by memory, I believe there are losses from which we need to be recovered. Memory can grab hold of us and move us, help us mourn, celebrate, be, become. Connections long forgotten or untended can shape us and remake our life.

Tracy K. Smith once described her poem “An Old Story” as a creation myth for our time. In truth, it reads more like de-creation. Apocalypse drenches this reality where human efforts have failed, and time has eaten almost all. But the poem ends—and the new world begins—with memory. Memory belies extinction, changes the air, and remakes relationships. Through memory, we are born again ... and being reminded of such newness, a foundational truth, fills our world with brilliance. ✕

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a United Methodist deacon who writes theological aesthetics, practices the arts, and works in faith-based social justice in Washington, D.C.



SEEKING PREDICTABILITY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

These days, I gather strength from predictability. Being home from work amid a global pandemic with two children—a toddler and a teenager—has filled my world with inventive ways to press on while working full-time, schooling the kids, and being a graduate student myself.

I have a newfound green thumb—working with my mini-garden, I recount stories from my childhood, stories of triumph, perseverance, and restless hope. I hope my toddler clings to these stories when things seem uncertain. I am also creating new stories to share for years

**“WHEN MY CHILDREN
GROW OLD, THEY WILL
LOOK TO THIS TIME
AND WONDER HOW WE
HANDLED THIS
UNCERTAINTY.”**

to come. My journal is overflowing with COVID-19 stats, sketches of plants, and day-to-day business. It has become a place I document our lives. When my children grow old, they will look to this time and wonder how we made it through or how we handled this uncertainty because they yearn for a time when things feel hopeful again. I hope my journals will help them remember and understand how we coped with a time when we self-quarantined, socially distanced, stayed six feet apart in masks.

The phrase “once we’re past this” has become commonplace on social media and in virtual meetings, but I’m not so sure it’s right. Do we move past this, or somehow move *with* this odd reality that surrounds us?

As I wrote this, police choppers were circling overhead after a burglary down the street. Waiting for police to respond wasn’t new in our historically underserved neighborhood, but it was a new thing to wait for the police during a global pandemic. While this was going on, we were on tornado watch; the weather conditions were ripe with uncertainty. Yet, even in that there was a predictable outcome: This could happen, or that. With the pandemic, it feels something could happen that no one has thought of. It’s the definition of unpredictable.

“How can we know the way if we don’t know where you’re going?” Thomas asked Jesus. Jesus answered, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Jesus knows that when we don’t know where our feet will land, we can find a way in him. When we don’t know where the truth lies, or whether we will live to see tomorrow, the answer lies not with Jesus, but *in* Jesus. Our articulation of this story by way of gardening, schooling, creating, writing, and everything else depends on this truth. ✕

Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros is a Tejana, Chicana, and Mujerista from San Antonio and a recipient of the Rubem Alves Award in Theopoetics.

EYEWITNESS

4



**"YOU CAN LOOK BACK
INTO THE VALLEY TO
SEE THE SCAR OF
REMEDATION."**

FINDING A WAY IN THE WILDERNESS

“There aren’t roads beyond here; it’s trails and wilderness—wilderness that goes all the way up into Canada.

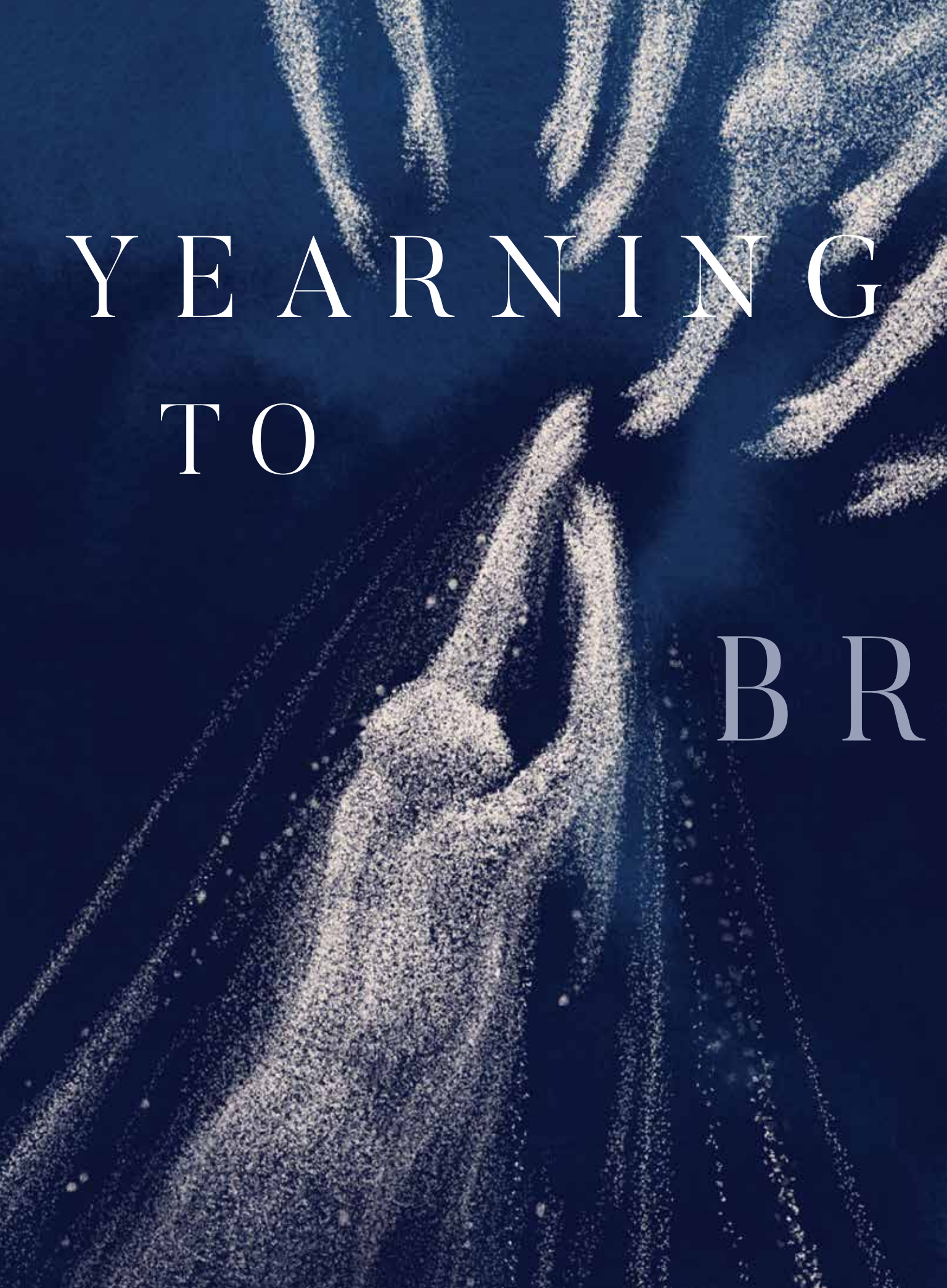
There’s something to the phrase ‘the pursuit of less.’ We try to live close to the land and what the land is able to do or produce; we live within that rather than our own will of what the ‘good life’ is.

We’re closed to the public and new arrivals until at least the end of August. This is providing a lot of reflection time. There are no distractions, really. There’s no TV, no cell phone services—this is a satellite phone we’re on right now. But the trees and the earth and the animals and all those things are very active—and it’s almost like a reversal.

We’re on a site that used to be a mining village, and there’s a big remediation project that went on here from 2011 to 2016. When you hike out east and farther north into the wilderness, you can look back into the valley to see the scar of remediation. It’s always a reminder of the consumption and the world’s depleting the land—it’s not sustainable.

I think about the physical wilderness and navigating the power of the earth, but also the wilderness we’re all in right now, whether it’s the COVID-19 pandemic or the issues of racism that are coming so powerfully to light. That feels like wilderness as well. ‘I will make a way in the wilderness,’ from Isaiah 43, comes to mind.” ✕

Chuck Hoffman spoke with *Sojourners* about living in the remote wilderness during a global pandemic. He and Peg Carlson-Hoffman are executive directors of Holden Village, a Lutheran education center in the Cascade mountains in Washington state.



YEARNING
TO

BR

How to rebuke death

and love your

neighbor,

in a

E A T H E
F R E E

pandemic

and beyond.

By Julie Polter

Illustrations by
Leonardo
Santamaria

The coronavirus travels in droplets humans
exchange as we

breathe,

talk,

sing,

laugh,

sneeze,

dance.

The basic sign of life — Are you breathing? —
has become a means of illness and death.

We know we intertwine with one another and the rest of creation in ways both material and symbolic: through blood and law, employment and play, through the full range of physical contact and social niceties, as well as loan papers, traffic tickets, and contracts. We sing a hymn in church, and the song swells into harmony, a gift of complexity and cooperation.

Through it all we breathe: Breathe in. Breathe out. My breath out mingles with your breath in. A communion of droplets. And so clusters of COVID-19 come not just in places of forced confinement—prisons, nursing homes, meatpacking plants—but after birthday dinners and choral practice, weddings and retirement parties.

“We’re all in this together” you might have heard as stay-at-home orders spread across the country; “the virus is the great equalizer.” After all, what could be more universal than breath? A pauper or a prime minister might breathe in a sufficient viral load to become critically ill.

LABORED BREATHING

But the conditions in which we breathe, the condition of our breathing bodies, and the conditions of the facilities that treat our bodies when breathing becomes difficult are rarely equal. Some people of great wealth have died from COVID-19, but many, many more of modest or little means have perished from it.

Societal inequalities of income and race incarnate as preexisting medical conditions, including diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, and kidney and pulmonary disease, that increase the risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19. For example, in Washington, D.C., the bottom 10 percent of income earners have a rate of diabetes nearly 74 percent greater than the median. The wealthy can pay for better food and housing; they have less stress and exposure to industrial pollutants and more access to recreation spaces and health care. The lowest-paying jobs, many of which force people into overexposure to the virus, are disproportionately filled by those with options limited by racial bias and legal status. As Adam Serwer wrote in *The Atlantic*, “Black and Latino workers are overrepresented among the essential, the unemployed, and the dead.”

And the pandemic did not stop the other ways we deprive people of the breath of life: A neighborhood lynch mob stalks, films, and kills jogger Ahmaud Arbery but is not charged for months; police officers shoot Breonna Taylor in her own home during a botched raid; a white cop kneels on George Floyd’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

I breathe out. You breathe in. Before coronavirus, some people did that without a second thought. Yet every day others were struggling to breathe at all.

This both is and is not a metaphor. Breath, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, is literal and figurative, physical and spiritual. In describing Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones, Hebrew Bible scholar Wil Gafney notes that “these one-time zombies had *ruach*,” a word that means both spirit and breath. “They had spirit-breath, life-breath, the breath of God poured into them and they returned fully to life, resurrected,” writes Gafney. The lack of breath, in all

its dimensions, is deadly. Its free flow is holy.

When people say they can’t breathe—whether from weakened lungs, air pollution, or an illegal chokehold—it is a threat to life. When fish float on a river because the water is deoxygenated, it is a threat to life. When the dangerously overworked experience a “shortness of breath,” it’s a societal alarm, not just an individual condition.

DEATH-CULT MATH

In the midst of all this, a kind of “death cult” has emerged, one that evangelizes for death as key to “our” way of life. President Trump first tweeted in March that “the cure”—i.e., shutdowns to help slow the spread of the virus—“can’t be worse than the problem itself,” pitting the economy against human fatalities. Sympathetic pundits and some protesters picked up on the theme.

Perhaps this is a natural outgrowth of the prosperity gospel and other forms of exceptionalism: The wealthy and powerful and those who emulate them consider themselves favored by God. Or maybe it’s the inevitable outcome of actuarial tables that calculate the monetary worth of a human life and margins of “acceptable” loss—estimations intrinsic to modern capitalism, with greed and racism usually riding shotgun.

But rhetoric that defines some deaths as “necessary” sinks to a level of cynicism that should be stunning: Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick gained notoriety for saying (and then reconfirming a few weeks later) that senior citizens like him should be willing to sacrifice their lives for the economy. Some added a strange theological and moral assessment: “It’s fascinating to see how the cultural loss of belief in God and eternity so often manifests in an outsized fear of death as the ultimate evil,” tweeted Alexandra DeSanctis, who writes on abortion issues for the conservative *National Review*. In a since-deleted tweet squall, R.R. Reno, editor of the conservative religious journal *First Things*, railed against the wearing of masks: “The mask culture [is] fear driven. Masks+cowardice. It’s a regime dominated by fear of infection and fear of causing infection. Both are species of cowardice.”

According to Far-Right websites, most governments around the world were “hysterical, panicky, and entirely excessive” in their response to the coronavirus, observes Austrian political scientist Natascha Strobl. In fascist ideology, Strobl notes, “weakness [which includes sickness] is never worthy of protection and has to be cast out.” The ideal pandemic strategy, to these Far-Right adherents, would be “to let things go their usual way, both in order not to ruin the economy and because the lockdown is a fearful and thus unmanly strategy,” writes Strobl. “What is demanded from people in the risk group is to not be weak, but strong, which means to die without protest.”

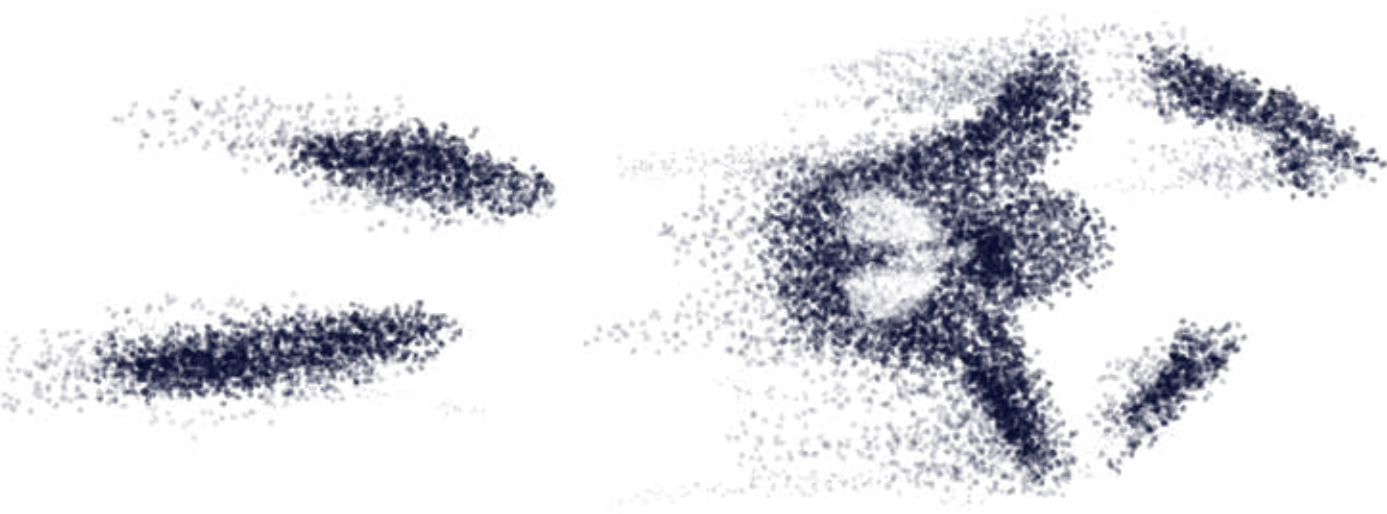
In this assertion of the saving power of (some people’s) death, the oft lauded and frequently virus-exposed “essential” workers—such as health care personnel, farmworkers, grocery store clerks, warehouse staff, meat packers—should keep risking their lives to “save the economy.” And factory workers, retail store clerks, teachers, service workers, and others should join them, even though the virus is nowhere near contained.

The economic situation is dire: One in four American workers lost a job between early March and late May, with 21 million receiving unemployment even as many states began to reopen in late spring. But instead of, say, the government supporting a teetering economy with a temporary “guaranteed wage” policy, many people are encouraged to make a thankless choice between their health and their livelihoods. Several states, including Vermont, Montana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and South Carolina, are encouraging businesses that reopen to report employees who refuse to return to work, even for health and safety concerns. The state can then stop unemployment payments and save money. CDC and OSHA workplace safety guidelines for reopening are scant, and OSHA has announced that they are “providing enforcement flexibilities,” that is, not really enforcing them at all.

As some are asked to sacrifice all in a time of crisis and economic scarcity, the Institute for Policy Studies reported in early June that U.S. billionaires have become \$565 billion richer since March 18. The death cult’s math seems skewed.

The pandemic did not stop

the other ways



we deprive

people of the breath of life.

“NO DOMINION”

Breath is life. When life is valued and someone stops breathing, those who are nearby shift into emergency mode. They try to resuscitate the person who is in danger. In other words, they rebuke death and love their neighbor.

Most Christians believe in the “resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come” and know that Jesus exhorted us to love, saying, “Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their life for their friends” (John 15:13). We may find ourselves called to self-sacrifice out of love for another. However, for the wealthy and powerful to deem the deaths of the powerless a noble calling to benefit themselves is not only theologically indefensible, it is blasphemy.

The claim that “death has no dominion” is an invitation to generous love and living, not a brush-off to those who are sick, suffering, fearful, and grieving. We breathe together in ways

seen and unseen. And though that makes us vulnerable, it also gives us common life. Without our God-given life-spirit, holy breath filling both our lungs and our souls, we are dry bones or zombies.

As of this writing there have been more than 120,000 U.S. COVID-19 fatalities. U.S. police killed an estimated 1,100 people in 2019, with CNN estimating that in-custody deaths in this country happen at a rate more than double that of Australia and six times the U.K. We, unlike God, can’t resurrect these souls. But we could address the conditions that have caused so much devastation—conditions that have been bearing down on some, stealing their breath, for a lifetime, a generation, centuries.

Hyper-local mutual aid networks—sometimes neighbors helping neighbors, sometimes strangers helping strangers—sprang up in cities across the country as the coronavirus shutdowns began, getting groceries to elders and other extra-vulnerable people, distrib-

uting masks, providing transportation and otherwise helping address some gaps caused by the widespread sudden loss of income, child care, and food access. Other such networks formed or expanded almost immediately during the protests in Minneapolis and elsewhere following the killing of George Floyd, distributing groceries, building supplies, diapers, and more after the destruction of grocery stores serving several neighborhoods.

To be clear, we can’t GoFundMe and go-to-Costco-for-others our way into deep structural changes. (Although these are more wholesome approaches than convening, as Gov. Andrew Cuomo has, a panel of billionaires to devise solutions to fix problems that at base are linked in part to the existence of billionaires.)

These practices don’t address the structural issues we face, but they offer us emotional, intellectual, and material rootedness in seeking the good of our neighborhood, town, or city. Just as the right posture helps us breathe better,

expanding and deepening our practice of community feeds organizing and advocacy efforts and civic engagement to extend care for our neighbor to a regional, state, and national scale.

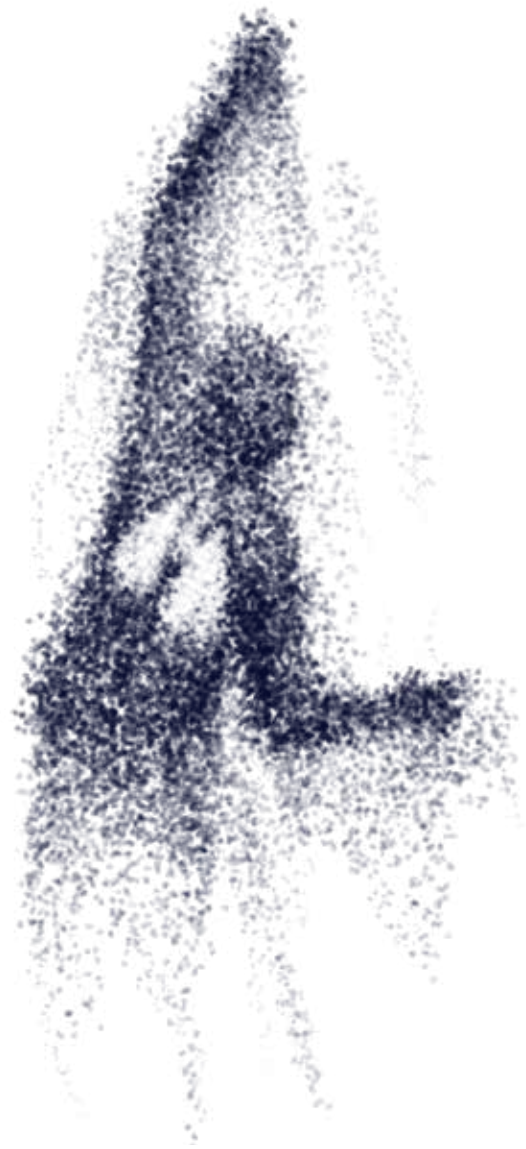
BREATHING EASIER

As the federal government fumbled and often abdicated the responsibility to care for its citizens, some governors, mayors, and city and county councils filled gaps, issuing stay-at-home orders, closing businesses, and committing to providing daily briefings with public health and aid information. Local leaders helped halt rent collections, stop utility shutoffs, and secured the early release of some inmates from state prisons and jails. “We’re winning stuff that last week sounded radical,” Kansas tenants-right activist Tara Raghuvver told *The New York Times*.

Likewise, nationwide protests in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and the ever-growing list of victims of U.S. police brutality brought actions thought unimaginable just weeks before: A majority of the Minneapolis city council publicly supported disbanding the city’s current police department. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti scrapped plans for a large police budget hike and instead pledged to pursue cutting up to \$150 million from the police budget.

Even some elected representatives whose economic and governing framework typically holds that “to those whom much has been given, much more should be given” have helped enact emergency aid and compassionate gestures during the pandemic. The long-term project is to challenge our culture and leaders to see this not as temporary “generosity” or charity but as basic humanity that lays out a political and social platform for how we move ahead.

Picture for a moment all those essential workers having a living wage. Think of unemployed people who had sufficient cash and in-kind assistance from their government to keep themselves and their family, housed, clothed, and fed. Imagine universal health care, so that those who had lost or needed to shift jobs would not find themselves without the ability to see a doctor or pay for prescriptions. Why not dismantle



the penal-industrial complex that siphons hope, wage-earners, and creative potential from entire neighborhoods, and shift the funding back to education, public health, housing, and the other basics that actually make a community safer, rather than surveilled and terrorized?

Thoughtful people have been researching and advocating for all these policies and more for decades; models and frameworks are waiting to be studied and adapted. As Frederick Zimmerman, co-author of a UCLA study on health inequality, told *The New York Times*, “When our politics starts to work better for those left behind, then their health will improve.” They will breathe easier. We all will breathe easier.

A return to sane tax laws and regulations would help bring our common wealth—the value created by our labor, taxes paid out of our pockets—back into service of the many, instead of making a few astonishingly rich individuals and families even richer.

All of this may be the work of generations. But like all projects, it has to begin before it can be accomplished. Even as we mourn the dead and live in the tense uncertainty of rapid change, visions of flourishing are possible and present. ♦

Julie Polter is managing editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

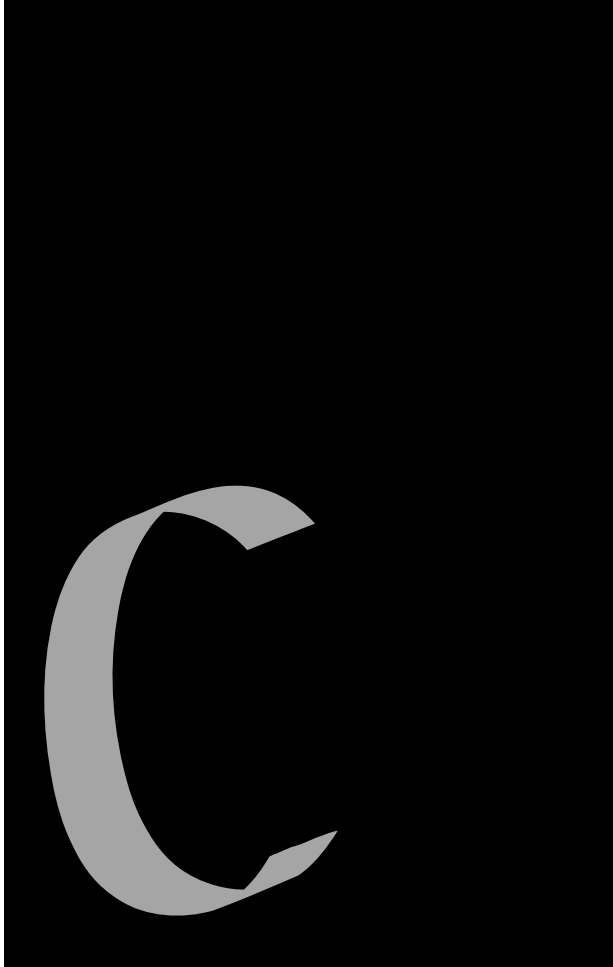


A NUCLEAR MOMENT OF TRUTH

Since Hiroshima, many have taken risk-filled action against nuclear weapons. How does such conscience for peace take shape?

By Margaret R. Pfeil

Illustrations by Jon Krause



Conscience, remarked moral theologian Richard Gula, “is another word like ‘sin’—often used but little understood.”

As a teenager growing up in the naval stronghold of San Diego during the Reagan era, I experienced a recurring nightmare about war with the Soviet Union, which became darker as I learned more about the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which took place 75 years ago this August. During that time Joan Kroc, an anti-nuclear leader who was also principal owner of the San Diego Padres baseball team, and others organized Mothers Embracing Nuclear Disarmament. On the 40th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, thousands gathered in Balboa Park, and my fear was transformed into a conviction of conscience to work for nuclear disarmament.

Conscience involves the capacity to discern and choose the morally right course of action in a particular situation. In doing so, a person brings to bear a lifelong process of formation of conscience. Each person has the obligation to form his or her conscience as fully as possible, and to follow it.

The formation of conscience is highly personal and socially situated. Hebrew and Christian scriptures, as well as theological writings such as those by St. Augustine, provide steps for building moral character, teaching moral reasoning, and forming our moral conscience to offer judgment based in practical reason to recognize and seek what is good and to reject what is evil.

This process for engaging Christian moral thinking involves four key elements:

- Be open to the truth and draw upon the prudent wisdom of personal and communal experience.

- Seek reliable teaching, including from scripture and Christian tradition.

- Review the best available information and consult trusted persons with relevant expertise.

- Engage prayerful discernment and conscientious action through the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide one’s application of moral values in each case.

Crises of conscience

Nuclear weapons have created crises of conscience since their inception. In the 1940s, Joseph Rotblat was a young Polish-born physicist working on the Manhattan Project, the U.S. government program that produced the first nuclear weapons. By early 1944, the initial goal of developing nuclear capability before Nazi Germany could do so had given way to attaining leverage over the Soviet Union. In March 1945, Gen. Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, acknowledged as much in casual dinner conversation among colleagues at the atomic weapons lab in Los Alamos, N.M.

For Rotblat, Grove’s aside proved decisive in shaping his own opposition to the project. At a time when Germany could still have prevailed and Russian soldiers were dying by the thousands in order to defeat the Germans, “Groves was speaking of them as if they were the enemy, more than the Germans.” Rotblat resigned from the Manhattan Project on moral grounds. In 1955, he co-authored a public letter with Albert Einstein and others opposing the nuclear weapons race. He won the Nobel Prize for peace in 1995 and wrote, “Throughout my career, I will consider the ethical implications of my work before I take action.”

Arriving at a decision point

Michael Izbicki graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 2008 and was selected to be a nuclear submarine officer. He trained to operate the S5W nuclear reactor as the engineering officer of the watch. However, a spiritual transformation fueled by Christianity’s teachings to “love your enemy” led Izbicki to the realization that he couldn’t participate in war.

Izbicki grew up in a military community adjacent to the Marine Corps base at Camp Pendleton in California. When he decided to join the military, he was encouraged in his decision by a Christian pastor and military veteran. In a 2013 TED talk, Izbicki recalled his own desire to “kill the bad guys” and “spread freedom and democracy throughout the world.”

Following his graduation from the Naval Academy, he completed graduate work in preparation for his chosen nuclear submarine assignment. Seeking to deepen his faith as part of becoming a better naval officer, he began to study scripture, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. He became convinced about the clear call of Jesus to love one's enemies and to return love for hate. For Izbicki, a tension developed between Jesus' teaching and the new naval officer's preparations to launch submarine-based nuclear missiles.

Izbicki had relatively reliable information on what a nuclear-tipped missile could do, but he needed clarification about the morality involved in pushing the button. He studied early Christian writings. He found moral exemplars, such as Cyprian of Carthage, who wrote favorably about Christians who rejected military service, and Martin of Tours, who left military service for reason of conscience; both had taken Jesus at his word. Though Izbicki was an active Christian all his life, he had never heard about the rich Christian tradition of rejecting war and violence.

Izbicki read modern Christian thinkers, such as Catholic leader Dorothy Day and Baptist pastor Martin Luther King Jr., and admired the continuity between their convictions and actions. Izbicki wrestled with the gap between the values he espoused and the military reality to which he had committed himself. At the Naval Academy, he had studied the just war tradition and "wanted our military to live up to the ideals of just war theory," he said. Instead, he witnessed disregard for noncombatant lives in some Marines who boasted of killing civilians.

Eventually, Izbicki sought consultation with a trusted person with relevant expertise. He went to talk to his military chaplain. There he learned for the first time about the military code pertaining to conscientious objection (CO). The chaplain suggested he fill out the CO application as part of his discernment process, a key step in Izbicki's formation of conscience.

In his CO application, Izbicki stated, "I used to believe in a just war, but I don't anymore." He could not identify a war that had satisfied the criteria of just war theory. He was troubled by the wasteful, exorbitant expenditure on nuclear weaponry, citing the \$345 billion slated for 12 new nuclear submarines. He pondered the many other more necessary uses of such a vast sum, such as education. "Our nuclear arsenal is already way out of proportion to any threat that we face," he wrote.

In 2009, Izbicki arrived at a decisive point, often called the "crystallization of conscience."

"Our nuclear arsenal is already way out of proportion to any threat that we face."

As part of his preparation for submarine training, he was given a psychological exam. He was asked if he could launch a nuclear missile if ordered to do so. He answered no. He acknowledged for the first time that he could no longer perform the military duties asked of him because it conflicted with his Christian beliefs.

In 2011, after a year and a half of opposition from the naval command, including litigation, Michael Izbicki was honorably discharged as a conscientious objector.

What Izbicki modeled at the personal level is, in fact, a process that everyone in this country is called to emulate—a moral necessity for all those living in a nation that continues to develop, maintain, and threaten to use nuclear weapons.

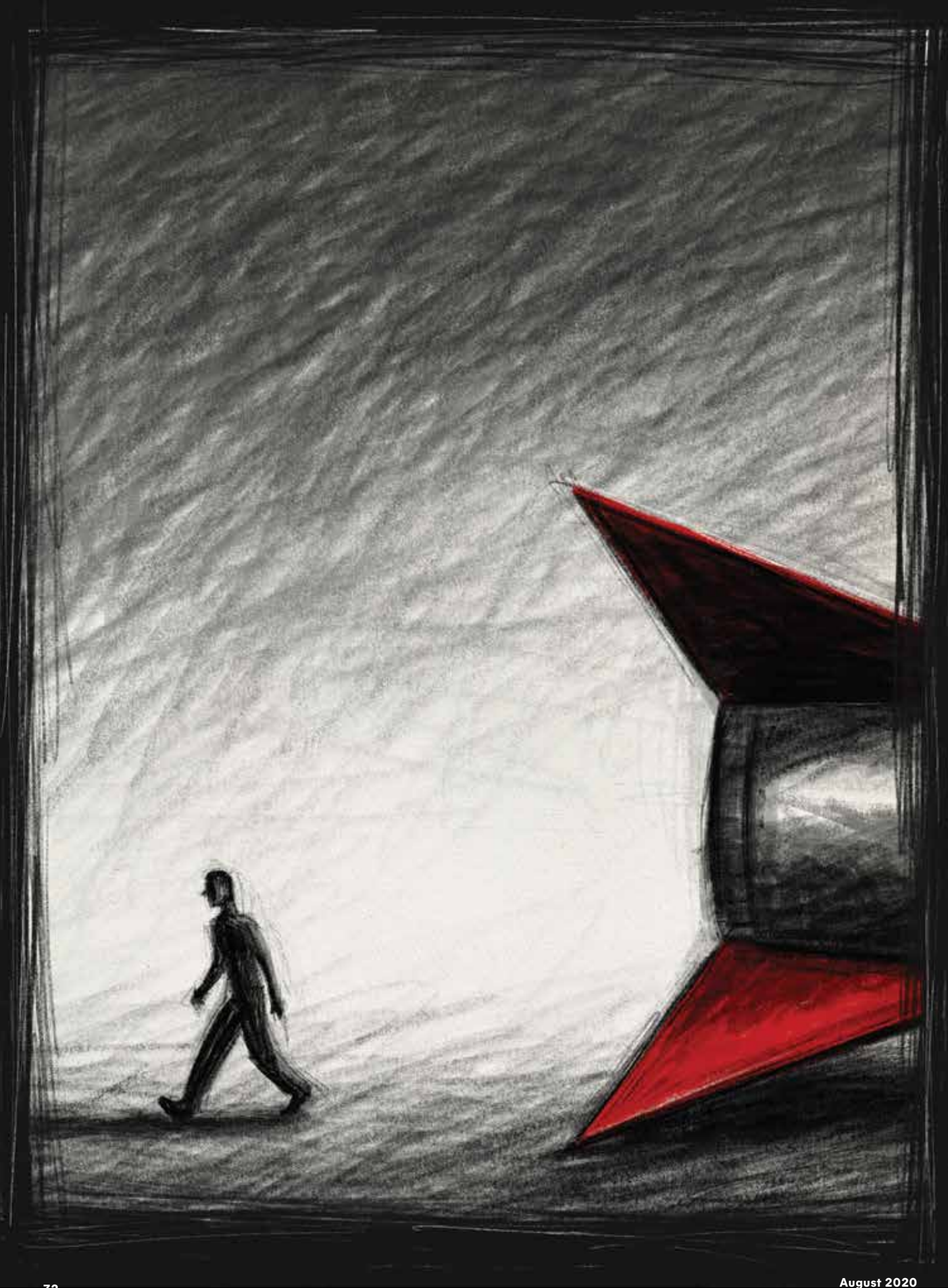
Acts of symbolic disarmament

Pope Francis' teachings on nuclear weapons are an invitation into forming the social consciences of Christians around the world, not only Catholics. In 2017, he told participants at a world conference on nuclear weapons that humanity cannot fail "to be genuinely concerned by the catastrophic humanitarian and environmental effects of any employment of nuclear devices ... If we also take into account the risk of an accidental detonation as a result of error of any kind, the threat of their use, as well as their very possession, is to be firmly condemned."

Six months after Francis' declaration, in April 2018, seven Catholics cut the fence at Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base in St. Marys, Ga., and entered the base to perform liturgical acts of symbolic disarmament. Kings Bay is home port to six ballistic missile Trident submarines, each of which deploy 20 Trident missiles carrying four or more warheads of at least 100 kilotons. The Hiroshima bomb was 14 kilotons. Each submarine has the destructive power of more than 500 Hiroshima bombs.

Recalling the prophet Isaiah's invitation to "beat swords into plowshares," the Kings Bay Plowshares 7, as they are known, prayed, poured blood, spray-painted messages against nuclear weapons, hammered on a replica of a nuclear weapon, hung banners, and waited to be arrested. Having spent years learning about nuclear weapons and months bringing their concerns into prayerful discernment and communal discussion, Mark Colville, Clare Grady, Martha Hennessy, Elizabeth McAlister, Patrick O'Neill, Carmen Trotta, and Father Stephen Kelly decided personally and as a group to engage in proactive civil resistance. Their acts were both the result of and the perpetuation of an authentic social conscience.

The Kings Bay 7 have been found guilty of conspiracy, trespassing on naval property, depredation of government property, and destruction of property on a naval installation. They face up to 25 years each in federal prison. McAlister was sentenced in early June to time served, after serving more than 17 months in pretrial confinement; the others were scheduled to be sentenced in late June.



Three challenges

The witness against nuclear weapons at the Kings Bay naval base highlights three challenges that nuclear weapons present to Christians forming their personal and social conscience: access to credible information; intersectional injustice; and genocide and ecocide.

President Dwight Eisenhower famously warned in 1961 of the political pressure exerted by the military-industrial complex and, according to nuclear industry journalist Stephanie Cooke, the “danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.” By ignoring that warning, Cooke argues, we’ve enabled “a huge, secretive, self-rationalizing system to take on a life of its own, backed by history, money, power, and a default conviction in its own inevitability.”

Formation of conscience regarding nuclear weapons is helped by unmasking and examining that secretive system, much in the way that Joseph Rotblat, Michael Izbicki, and the Kings Bay Plowshares 7 did through their forms of public witness.

For members of the military, scientific, and manufacturing communities responsible for the production, maintenance, and potential use of nuclear weapons, pastoral support is necessary to help them hold their work up to the light of conscience. Church communities, particularly those serving military families, can educate their congregants on nuclear weapons and on the economics of the nuclear weapons industry that is interwoven with economic exploitation of people of color, such as placing nuclear waste sites in poor communities. Paying attention to narratives such as Izbicki’s sharpens the ethical questions at stake.

Through the expansive reach of transnational corporations, the nuclear weapons industry is, by design, spread throughout the U.S. and across the globe. Every taxpayer and many people with 401(k) investments are financing the research, development, and maintenance of nuclear weapons. Between fiscal years 2018 and 2047, the total price tag of U.S. nuclear forces will be an estimated \$1.7 trillion, adjusted for inflation.

The production and maintenance of nuclear weapons produces deadly nuclear waste. Here Martin Luther King’s interconnected web of “racism, militarism, and materialism” is evident. At Rocky Flats in Colorado, where plutonium bomb cores were made, “infinity rooms,” where the radiation was so high it couldn’t be measured, were sealed off by lead panels and left forever. Other areas, such as the Oak Ridge nuclear complex near Knoxville,

“Much of the world’s nuclear industry has been sited on or near Native lands.”

—Winona LaDuke

Tenn., and the Hanford nuclear site on the Columbia River in eastern Washington, now carry the designation “national sacrifice zones,” a phrase coined by engineers at the Department of Energy in the 1980s for sites too expensive to clean up. The U.S. is poorly equipped to deal with its deadly radioactive waste.

To date, the U.S. does not have a permanent disposal facility or proven technical means to process and store radioactive waste. As a default, Indigenous environmental activist Winona LaDuke noted, “Much of the world’s nuclear industry has been sited on or near Native lands. Some 70 percent of the world’s uranium originates from Native communities.” Navajo land is home to more than 1,000 abandoned uranium mines. In the absence of federal standards or an organized reclamation plan, some Indigenous communities, such as the Navajo and Laguna Pueblo, have forced the federal government to develop a clean-up plan for their lands.

Seventy-five years is enough

The development of nuclear weapons took root in a trend toward the increasing destructive capacity of conventional weaponry and concomitant disregard for noncombatant life, as well as ideological rationalizations for extermination of whole peoples and cultures, or genocide.

Nuclear weapons development prepared the way for a sort of inertial acceptance of mass extermination of not just the human species but also the whole ecosystem, or ecocide.

As *Fate of the Earth* author Jonathan Schell wrote, “nuclear weapons and nuclear strategy, which actually trade on genocide for political purposes, called mutual assured destruction, threaten not just individual people, in however large numbers, but the order of creation, natural and human, and this is something new.”

At stake with nuclear weapons—their manufacture, maintenance, and accidental or purposeful use—is not only individual members of a wide variety of living systems (familial, social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological) but the very relational structures that bind them together.

This spring, with the COVID-19 pandemic looming, the Trump administration requested \$44.5 billion “to sustain and modernize U.S. nuclear delivery systems and warheads and their supporting infrastructure,” a 19 percent increase in one year. As the United States faces a severe economic downturn leaving millions out of work, imagine what could be done with that money and an adequately formed public conscience. ♦

Margaret R. Pfeil, a founding member of St. Peter Claver Catholic Worker community, holds a joint appointment in the theology department and in the Center for Social Concerns at University of Notre Dame, where she is also a fellow of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies.





Michael Heimbach, left, a white nationalist who grew up Catholic, was a featured speaker at a neo-Nazi rally in Knoxville, Tenn.

HARBORING A CULTURE OF HATE

The Catholic Church, once persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan, today has a visible white-power faction.

By ERIC MARTIN

When the U.S. Catholic bishops gathered to draft a document on race in the wake of the 2017 white terrorist rally in Charlottesville, Va., Bishop Anthony Taylor of Little Rock, Ark., submitted an amendment to condemn the imagery of swastikas, Confederate flags, and nooses. The U.S. bishops deliberated and voted to reject it.

The document, “Open Wide Our Hearts,” was billed as “a pastoral letter against racism,” making its writers’ silence on three famously extreme symbols of racism a curious one. The bishops explained themselves by arguing that swastikas and nooses were already “widely recognized signs of hatred,” which would seem to make them all the easier to condemn. (Interestingly, they eschewed this logic when issuing their only condemnation, against violence toward police.) As for the Confederate flag, “some still claim it as a sign of heritage,” they argued.

While this logic indefensibly hand-waves the history of slavery, murderous opposition to civil rights, and violence such as the 2015 shooting at a Black church in Charleston, S.C., as a vaguely benign “heritage,” it also fails to account for the flag’s use among those with no ties to the Confederacy. Take, for example, U.S. Rep. Steve King. While most widely known for asking what’s so wrong with white supremacy and white nationalism, King, who is Catholic, has also displayed a Confederate flag on his congressional desk. The quite obvious meaning of the flag’s presence on the desk of King, who represents a district in Iowa until January, is apparently lost on the bishops, given their claims about “Southern” heritage.

The decision to avoid condemning swastikas, nooses, and Confederate flags would be troubling under any circumstances. But this moral failure is compounded by the fact that Catholics are among the most integral groups that rally behind these symbols. From the highest reaches of government to the lowest depths of social media, many members of hate groups and politicians who model their talking points are part of the bishops’ flock. Catholics not only contributed to the platform for the so-called alt-righters who terrorized Charlottesville and killed Heather Heyer but are leaders and even founders of the most dangerous neo-Nazi groups in existence.

The Catholic Church, once persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan, today has a visible white-power faction. As long as the bishops actively refuse to condemn its banners, they give white supremacists space to embrace their anti-Black and anti-Semitic work free of religious dissonance.

“No cultural Christians allowed”

While the problem starts at the top, it is impossible to ignore how it has manifested on the streets. In 2017, an alliance of the KKK, neo-Nazis, and the alt-right did much of their planning for the Unite the Right rally in chat rooms that have since been made public by the media outlet Unicorn Riot. One of the more popular chat rooms was designated specifically for Catholics to explore the connections between their church and the rally. “No cultural Christians allowed,” its heading read. It was reserved for “dedicated” Catholics only and named after Nicholas J. Fuentes, a Catholic member of the neo-Nazi group Identity Evropa. Fuentes is an online influencer with 90,000 followers on social media; he was present at Charlottesville. Across all servers, more than 14,000 posts related to Catholicism were released in the aftermath of the event, and an early post captures their spirit: “I’m baptized Catholic [and] ready for a crusade.”

Here Catholics discussed everything from their favorite saints to their thoughts on Pope Urban II. They talked of “how to defend proper Catholicism” and shared links to the Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter. They saluted “Sieg heil!” to each other. They went from joking about the murder of Heather Heyer, the anti-racist activist who was run over in Charlottesville by a neo-Nazi, to singing “Ave Maria” together. They discussed the merits of *Mein Kampf*, identified themselves as “Charles Coughlin Roman Catholics” (after the 1930s Catholic radio demagogue), encouraged genocide against Jews, advertised the anti-Semitic podcast *The Daily Shoah*, and confessed their allegiance to what they call the “14 words”: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”

Augustus Sol Invictus grew up Catholic. Matthew Heimbach was raised in a Catholic family and eventually switched to the Orthodox Church. Both have been identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “major players from the ‘Unite the Right’ rally.” Faith Goldy—a Catholic who wrote for *The Catholic Register* and was banned from Facebook for participating in a neo-Nazi podcast on the most prominent Nazi website, recited the “14 words” online, and advocated white secession from the U.S.—reported on the rally from the ground. Fuentes posted on Facebook, “What an incredible rally here in Charlottesville,” and added that “a tidal wave of white identity is coming,” “the fire rises,” and “you will not replace us,” echoing the anti-Jewish chants in the torchlit rally from the night before, in which attendees stood behind the very symbols the bishops refused to condemn, posting pictures of nooses online and brandishing swastikas and Confederate flags on the streets.

“The most hard-core collection”

After Charlottesville, Catholics have continued to be in the vanguard of neo-Nazi violence. In 2018, Rinaldo Nazarro formed a terrorist training group, modeled after al Qaeda, called The Base. Nazarro, who has fled to Russia, was raised in a family of dedicated Catholics, attended an elite Catholic prep school in New Jersey and Villanova University, and continued donating to his Catholic high school 25 years after graduating. The inaugural online post for Nazarro’s group read, “Führer, you were only the beginning. We will finish what you started,” and he told an infiltrator that “This will be

the most hard-core collection of pro-white individuals in the world.” The Base calls for a race war and an all-white Pacific Northwest homeland, plans violence against Jews and Black people, organizes military training camps, builds explosive devices, and pushes for “accelerationist” tactics that seek to usher in catastrophic societal collapse.

Another of the most extreme neo-Nazi organizations today is Atomwaffen Division, whose logo is from the infamous German SS paramilitary. The group’s influences include Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson, and its aim is the violent overthrow of the government by guerrilla tactics. Atomwaffen’s most well-known murder occurred in Jan-

AFTER CHARLOTTESVILLE, CATHOLICS HAVE CONTINUED TO BE IN THE VANGUARD OF NEO-NAZI VIOLENCE.

uary 2018. Samuel Woodward, who came “from a devoutly Catholic family” and as a student drew Confederate flags in art class, was charged with stabbing a 19-year-old gay, Jewish college student, Blaze Bernstein, 20 times and hiding Bernstein’s body in an Orange County, Calif. park. Woodward had traveled with an Atomwaffen division leader for a summer, helped organize members in Southern California, trained in weaponry and outdoor survival skills, and posed with other Atomwaffen members while making Nazi salutes. He spoke openly about his Catholic faith on social media and attended Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church in Newport Beach, including after the murder. When police arrested him, they found more than 100 pieces of Nazi, anti-gay, and hate group content on his phone. Judging by other Atomwaffen members, including former Catholic Devon Arthurs, charged with two murders, and the Telegram user who goes by “Catholicwaffen,” Woodward is not alone in representing both his church and perhaps the most lethal neo-Nazi group in the country.

Well-dressed Catholic nationalism

The problem is not just in shadowy corners of the internet or terrorist attacks; it appears more respectably in business suits and government appointments. One of the alt-right’s biggest political influences is former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, communications director under Ronald Reagan. He and fellow Catholic Joe Sobran served as inspiration for a blog referred to as “the alt-right’s favorite philosophy instructor,” and his comments on immigration and questioning the Holocaust are the type of kinder, gentler white nationalism that provides oxygen for the more obvious forms. Buchanan has claimed that Jews hold the “real power” in the U.S., that not as many died in the Holocaust as reported, and that “this has been a country built, basically, by white folks.” When an interviewer suggested that white people had held power in the U.S. for years, Buchanan bristled. “I don’t know where you grew up,” he retorted. “I grew up in a Catholic ghetto.”

Before the alt-right showed its colors in Charlottesville, the two most prominent writers for the movement’s unofficial website, Breitbart News, were both Catholic. In 2016,

Breitbart's former executive chair Steve Bannon called the site "a platform for the alt-right." Bannon takes his religion seriously, according to those close to him, and when he listed the six books that most influenced him, the list included the classics *The Imitation of Christ* and *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. He has also aligned himself with American Renaissance, a eugenicist think tank expounding the scientific inferiority of Black people, and helped fellow Catholic Katie McHugh get "deeper and deeper into the world of white nationalism," as she put it. After she retweeted an American Nazi Party member multiple times and posted, "Let's make Mecca into a strip mall!" Bannon not only shielded her from punishment but later made her producer of his radio show.

Bannon oversaw the rise of his most well-known writer at Breitbart, the Catholic Milo Yiannopoulos, who would become famous for leading a harassment campaign against Black actress Leslie Jones that included unprintable slurs. Yiannopoulos has worked closely with American Renaissance, compared Black Lives Matter participants to "petulant children," and was filmed singing karaoke with friends giving Nazi salutes. He also calls himself a "Catholic theocrat" and claims that Catholicism is the very basis of a good and true society. "Catholicism is the idea, the West is the practice," he told an interviewer. Making his thinly veiled racist language explicit, he bragged of white people, "We invented all the good shit."

Donald Trump hired Bannon to be his chief strategist, welcoming the alt-right movement into the highest circles of power. He tapped another Catholic, Kellyanne Conway, to be his campaign manager and later his presidential counselor. Conway calls Catholicism the "bedrock" of her life, and she cited her religion as she defended Trump's policy of separating immigrant children from their mothers in detention. "As a mother, as a Catholic ... I will tell you that nobody likes this policy," Conway said on *Meet the Press*, but she said family separation was justified because "it is a crime to enter this country illegally." Conway sought to use her Catholicism as a shield against criticism while stripping Central American children from their families.

The cost of refusing to speak

The threat is not that white nationalists will take over the Catholic Church. The threat is that the Catholic Church harbors a culture sufficiently friendly to white nationalism

that people can comfortably embrace both the faith and the most extreme forms of racial hatred. As long as Catholics can be found in neo-Nazi groups, as long as Atomwaffen members can dub themselves Catholicwaffen or receive Communion after murdering Jewish people, something in the church itself poses a concrete danger to Jews and people of color.

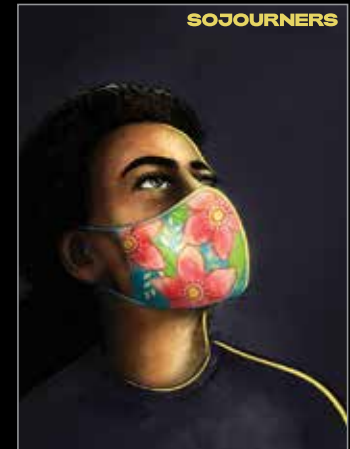
But more serious than foot soldiers are the Kellyanne Conways of the world, who help shape communal thought in ways that make radical white supremacy so pervasive as to turn invisible. Conway, in particular, models the kind of vapid anti-logic based on, in her own words, "alternative facts" that closely mirrors the taunting disdain of the alt-right when they deflect threats as attempts at humor and shed every argument or principle standing in the way of white power.

And yet, there will be more Kellyanne Conways and Steve Bannons as long as the U.S. bishops leave religious space open for them. They did just that by refusing to speak against swastikas, Confederate flags, and nooses, the three most potent symbols of white terrorism in the U.S. In doing so, neo-Nazis have more leeway to believe their white supremacist actions are done not in spite of Catholicism but in harmony with it.

Thankfully, Catholic social teaching springs up elsewhere. The faithful can read theologians such as M. Shawn Copeland and Bryan Massingale or follow the Black Catholic Theological Symposium. They can turn to Catholic activists among the civil rights and Black Power movements such as Father George Clements and the Black Unity Masses he sparked, as well as Diane Nash, who led the second wave of the Freedom Rides after the first was bombed by whites and began a two-year jail sentence for her witness while pregnant. They might even look across the 2017 Unite the Right rally's police barricades to see Dr. Jalane Schmidt, founder of the Charlottesville Black Lives Matter chapter and public historian, who since the rally has given public lectures about the real history behind Confederate imagery. Until the bishops join one of her downtown walking tours, it is in Schmidt and people like her that Catholics can find their anti-racist leaders. ❖

Eric Martin teaches religion at the University of California, Los Angeles, and is co-editor of *The Berrigan Letters: Personal Correspondence Between Daniel and Philip Berrigan*.

A special gift of encouragement.

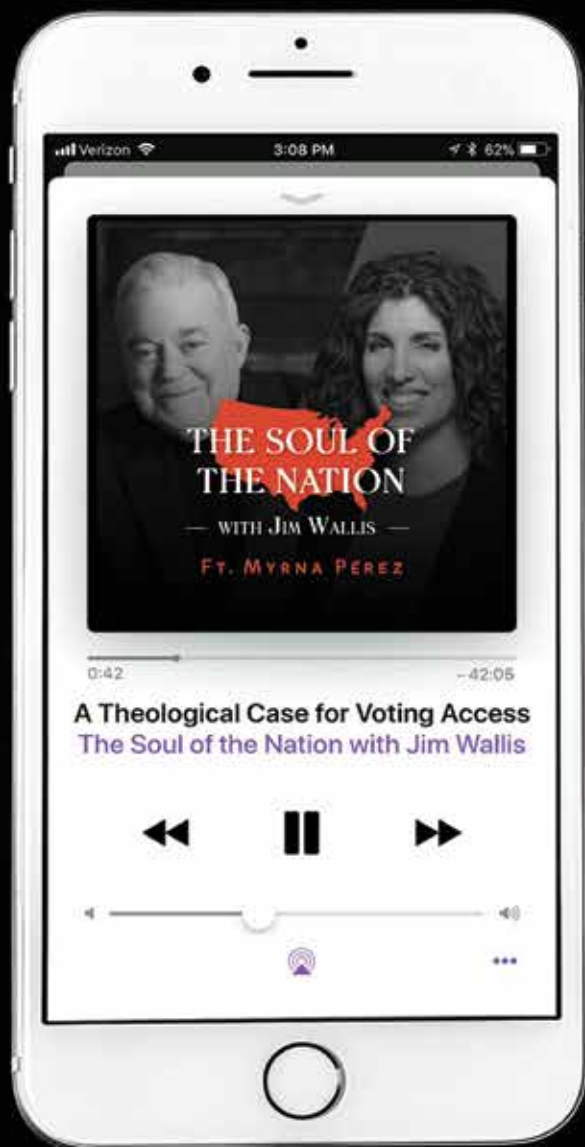


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DRIVE-BY TRUCKERS AWAIT THE RESURRECTION OF MORAL CHRISTIANITY.



Music

In 1996, Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley co-founded Drive-By Truckers, an alternative-country rock band based in Athens, Ga., that has always celebrated speaking truth to power while making unforgettable music. Over the years, Hood and Cooley have remained the chief songwriters in the band, and one thing has been constant since day one: They speak their minds. That has never been truer than on their latest record, *The Unraveling*.

"It's a heavy record, it's really heavy," says Hood. "It was painful to write."

Much of that heaviness revolves around Hood and Cooley plunging themselves into the hypocrisy of the evangelical movement that has come to a vivid crescendo since the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

"I'm not going to put up any pretense that I'm religious, but there's a lot of Christianity in my background," Hood admits. "I have very, very close family members who, until fairly recently, considered themselves part of the Christian Right." He watched as those family members experienced a political turnaround,



partly due to how they saw politicians co-opting their faith in ways that went against their interpretation of the teachings of Jesus.

"They're particularly offended by the whole 'thoughts and prayers' thing being bandied about as an excuse to do nothing, as an excuse for inaction," he says. Because of that, he put pen to paper and wrote the aptly titled "Thoughts and Prayers," a hauntingly beautiful song that forces listeners to confront the senseless gun violence for which America has become known.

"They're counting up the casualties, everyone's choosing sides," he sings, "there's always someone to blame, never anywhere to hide / Thoughts and prayers / Thoughts and prayers."

Though it may seem like Hood is making light of faith, he's actually standing up for what many around him believe. "I'm not belittling anything that gives anybody some modicum of hope and happiness and comfort in this crazy world," he says. "Whether it's going to church or going to a rock show or reading a book or holding your children, anything that makes this mean world seem a little less mean is to be celebrated and treasured. So, when people use that, use religion, as an excuse to not do anything, yeah, I'm offended by that."

That sense of indignation propels the album into several other realities the country faces today.

"If you use religion as an excuse to say it's okay that children ... are ripped from their parents' arms, I'm offended by that," he goes on, giving a nod to another track on *The Unraveling*, "Babies in Cages."

The indignation covering the Truckers' new record is centered on Donald Trump, both what he says and how his words influence millions. "The fact that he has somehow gotten so much support from [evangelicals]—

well, if I were a devout Christian, I would be devoutly offended by that."

Despite his own beliefs, Hood has remained close with a cousin who is deeply committed to Christianity. "His journey is beautiful and inspirational," he says. "He used to come at politics from a very opposite angle from me. I don't think he'd call himself a Democrat now, but he also can't support what's happening in the Republican Party. He went through a crisis of faith that culminated with him realizing he was disillusioned with what was being done in the name of faith."

As he's talked more with his cousin, Hood has been encouraged to check out writers and pastors such as Brian Zahnd who, like Hood, are not afraid to speak their minds in favor of standing up for what they believe to be right. "I'm not trying to pawn myself off as something I'm not," Hood says, "but much of my morality comes from things I learned growing up among deeply Christian people."

The Unraveling may be a heavy record, but Hood recognizes that a semblance of hope lies embedded in the truths about which he and Cooley sing. This may be clearest on the album's closing track, "Awaiting Resurrection," as Hood sings, "I try with all my might to seek the truth you've been rejecting / Seeking some salvation to the limits of my talents / I hold my family close tryin' to find the balance / Between the bad shit goin' down and the beauty that this life can keep injecting."

Though it may seem like hope is hard to find in lyrics like that, Hood sees this particular song as a call to action of sorts for listeners—and all Americans—to not only deal with the reality of what's happening in the country, but to survive. Hood closes the song with the unforgettable lyrics, "Guns and ammunition / Babies in a cage / They say nothing can be done, but they tell us how they prayed / In the end we're just standin' / Watchin' Greatness fade into darkness / Awaiting resurrection."

May more people join this call to survive as we, along with Drive-By Truckers, await resurrection. ✨

**"I TRY WITH
ALL MY MIGHT
TO SEEK THE
TRUTH YOU'VE
BEEN
REJECTING."**

Chuck Armstrong is a pastor and writer in New York City. Originally from a town of about 150 people in northeast Kansas, he lives in Hell's Kitchen with his family.

On Film



From
*Mad Max:
Fury Road*

A BRIGHT CODA

By Abby Olcese

We often think the word “apocalypse” refers to an “end of days” scenario. While that is one usage, it’s incomplete. The Greek root, *apokálypsis*, is defined as revelation, or an unveiling. It’s often used in prophetic terms, as in the biblical book of Revelation. An apocalypse doesn’t mean destruction so much as laying bare humanity’s underlying truths.

This year, George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*, one of the best post-apocalyptic films in a series that helped define the genre, turns 5. Miller’s *Mad Max* movies are fascinating not just because of their creativity and economical storytelling, but also for how they address the revelatory nature of apocalypse, both in humanity’s sinful nature and its capacity for selflessness.

The *Mad Max* films happen in a violent wasteland that Miller shows as the direct result of humanity’s greed and recklessness. *Fury Road* advances that revelation, altering the series’ attitude from cynicism to hope. *Fury Road*’s message of renewal, and prophetic undertones, makes it a perfect movie for uncertain times.

In the film, our long-suffering hero Max (played by Tom Hardy) wanders a post-apocalyptic desert in a future defined by violence and scarcity. He’s captured by the soldiers (called war boys) of Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), a tyrant who hoards precious water in his mountain lair.

Joe also has a harem of war brides, who try to escape him with help from sympathetic tanker driver Furiosa (Charlize Theron). When Joe discovers this, he sends a platoon of war boys to bring the women back; Max is brought

along with the war boys, then escapes. Max goes on the run with Furiosa and the women, who hope to find safety with Furiosa’s former community, who live in a fertile desert oasis.

Fury Road starts from Max’s perspective, but Furiosa quickly emerges as the real protagonist. This shifts the focus of the film from Max’s self-preservation instincts to Furiosa’s selflessness. Given her backstory (she was taken as a child by Joe and made a life for herself in unbelievable circumstances), Furiosa should be just as cynical as Max, if not more so. However, the loss of the love she knew early in life hasn’t made her bitter but drives her to help others.

Miller’s previous *Mad Max* films are about the destructive effects of humanity’s sinful impulses. Our desire for power, selfish treatment of the earth, and refusal to change for the good of others brought about an unrecognizable hellscape. *Fury Road*, however, is a bright coda. If the other films reveal humanity’s propensity for evil, *Fury Road* reveals our potential for good. It reminds us that if we reject the dominant forces of sin and pursue justice, we can bring about a better world. ❖

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

New & Noteworthy

FORCE OF NATURE

The podcast *Floodlines* tells the stories of four New Orleanians who stayed in the city as Hurricane Katrina hit, 15 years ago this August. Through eight episodes based on a year of reporting, the extensive traumas caused by the storm and a botched federal response are examined.

The Atlantic



Do the Work

David W. Swanson wants Christians to know that diversity is not the solution to society’s racial injustice. In his book *Redis discipling the White Church: From Cheap Diversity to True Solidarity*, he argues that the church must completely rethink discipleship in order to achieve lasting solidarity and justice.

IVP



2020 Vision

Valarie Kaur shows readers what joyful practice of social justice looks like in her book *See No Stranger: Revolutionary Love*. Drawing from her experience in the fields of law and activism, Kaur offers examples of how community and culture can be transformed.

One World



WOMEN AND BOLT CUTTERS

By
Faith-Marie
Zamblé

IMAGINE IF WE SAW EACH OTHER AS COLLABORATORS.



Curated

Fiona Apple's 2020 internet takeover began the moment she released her newest album, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*, in April. This cyber movement was not orchestrated by Apple, who does not have any social media accounts, but

rather by the countless women tweeting, Instagramming, and exulting over the album. I probably have the algorithm to thank for the prevalence of these posts in my feed, as they were mostly from my demographic—millennial women with overflowing collections of books and high-waisted pants. Yet, algorithm or no, the joy I witnessed was completely organic, and if you've heard the album, you'll understand why.

Many people's introduction to Fiona Apple is not her strong, eclectic body of work. Instead, it's her infamous speech at the 1997 MTV Video Music Awards in which she exhorts viewers, especially adolescents, not to model their lives after "what we think is cool." After that, Apple seemed to vanish from the public eye, emerging every so often with an absurdly long album title that tied bundles of complicated songs together.

I'm beating around the bush with the word "complicated." What I really mean is "angry." Fiona Apple is one of the few

women in music who is allowed to be furious in an unpretty way. She has become a secular patron saint for prophetic women whose insight makes them vulnerable to the ridicule of others.

Fetch the Bolt Cutters, all jangly DIY percussion, layered vocals, and sharp turns of phrase (just listen to "For Her"—I won't spoil it here), feels like the perfect companion to life as a woman, but also, strangely enough, to our quarantined existence. It is a missive from someone who has spent a good deal of time with herself, taking her pain apart while trying not to let it break her. Most importantly, it's an album that is trying to heal women's relationships with one another. In "Ladies," Apple generously addresses her ex's new girlfriend, suggesting she help herself to whatever Apple has left in the cabinets. On the titular track, Apple sings, "A girl can roll her eyes at me and kill," which perfectly sums up the fraught relationships so many of us women have with our female counterparts. But, imagine, Apple seems to say, if we saw each other as collaborators, victims of the same systems instead of competition.

Something else happens in "Fetch the Bolt Cutters": Apple almost chants, "I need to run up that hill," and I'm immediately reminded of Kate Bush's incredible track, "Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)." What does it mean to place yourself in a lineage when we live in a world that is dominated by a virus we haven't seen before? What use is history? A whole lot, it turns out. Remembering where we've come from and who has gone before us is perhaps the only way to puzzle out of our current predicaments. Perhaps then we'll be free of the structures that keep us at each other's throats. Once that happens, it'll be time to fetch the—you know the rest. ❖

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and M.F.A. candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.



NO MATTER HOW FAR STELLA DISAPPEARS INTO THE PRIVILEGES OF WHITENESS, THE REALITIES OF RACE DEEPEN HER SILENCE.

but refused to be treated like Negroes.” An idea born of a freed slave, the twins’ ancestor, as he “stood in the sugarcane fields he’d inherited from the father who’d once owned him.”

While fictional, Mallard is still situated in America. This means the community’s proximity to whiteness is no protection: As children, Desiree and Stella are forced to witness their father’s lynching. Decades later, Stella cannot sleep without a baseball bat at her side. No matter how far Stella disappears into the privileges of whiteness, the realities of race deepen her silence, crippling new bonds and poisoning relationships.

The novel covers two decades, from 1968 to 1986. Jude grows up alienated in Mallard until she flees to college at UCLA. In Los Angeles Jude finds a new home with her boyfriend Reese, who is trans, and their friend Barry, professor by day and drag queen Bianca by night. Meanwhile, her aunt Stella remains a specter in Jude’s narrative. In an impecca-

bly wrought sequence of events, Jude befriends Stella’s daughter, an aspiring actress. Soon, Jude finds her way back to Stella.

As much a compassionate tale of belonging as it is a critical exploration of race, *Vanishing* depicts a world that is achingly real, where no two subjects are mutually exclusive. It shines in the moments of human connection (the strained, the failed, and the successful), when Bennett juxtaposes characters’ desires to reveal dreams and delusions, internal narratives that are simultaneously contradictory and true. Propulsive, urgent, and endlessly engaging, this second novel cements Bennett’s place among the best writers working today. ✦

Elinam Agbo holds an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan’s Helen Zell Writers’ Program. Born in Ghana, she grew up in the U.S. Midwest.

DREAMS AND DELUSIONS

The Vanishing Half,
by Brit Bennett

Riverhead Books

In her stunning second novel, Brit Bennett, author of *The Mothers*, once again examines race and kinship. This time, she interrogates the color line through the Vignes twins—their coming of age and its impact on the subsequent generation. Born and raised in the fictional town of Mallard, La., the twins dream of escaping their stifling community. At 16, they run away together. In New Orleans, a desperate choice severs their bond: Stella passes as white to get a job, then leaves her sister Desiree in order to marry a white man.

Years later, when Desiree flees an abusive marriage and returns to Mallard with her daughter, Jude, the town is shocked by the child’s color: “black as tar,” “blueblack.” Having inherited her father’s complexion, Jude looks nothing like her mother. From its opening pages, *The Vanishing Half* grounds us in this “strange” town that, “like any other, was more idea than place.” The idea: a community for those “who would never be accepted as white



A SHADOWY HOPE

In the Lateness of the World:
Poems, by Carolyn Forché

Penguin Press

C

Carolyn Forché's fourth poetry collection, *Blue Hour*, appeared in 2003, and her readers have longed for the next ever since. It's hard to imagine any poetry book worth a wait of 17 years. Forché's new collection, *In the Lateness of the World*, is worth more.

As the title suggests, Forché explores a dying world—countries ravaged and erased by war, islands drowned in natural disasters, seas overflowing with garbage. The poems are both haunting and haunted, including the memories of a lost world and the corpses that remain.

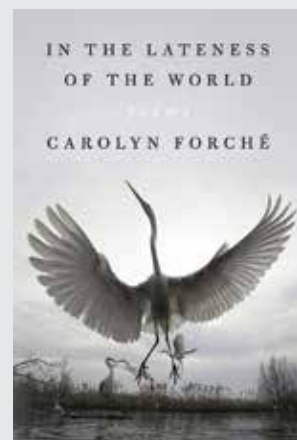
Forché coined the term "poetry of witness." Her witness here is not only characteristically unflinching but also a challenge to readers.

The first half of the book mostly grieves the world's tragedies at large, but always with the particularity that gives her ghosts a pulse. Nearly every poem includes rapid lists of sharp images. Forché's lists dizzy and overwhelm, effectively dropping us into warzones and forcing us to follow her through an apocalypse. In "A Room," she articulates what this technique mirrors and means: "books chosen at random, as our moments are, / ours and the souls of others, who glimmer beside us / for an instant, here by chance and radiant with significance."

The book's second half is more personal, with many poems written for or in memory of friends. But all carry the weight (and often the context) of universal grief. In this half, we also see a shadowy hope. She offers no pithy explanations of pain nor promises of starting over. Rather, she gestures toward a redemption of what is broken—a resurrection with wounds. This hope is eschatological and most directly addressed in the book's final poem, "What Comes," which employs language of "not-yet." She even closes the book with a charge to "open then to the coming of what comes."

For three years, I have begun my literature class with the book's first poem, "Museum of Stones," written in memory of one of Forché's friends who collected stones during his travels. I don't reveal that backstory until my students have read the poem on their own. They often note that the poem feels like a tour through the world at its best and worst. Nearly all say that while they don't understand why this poet is so interested in stones, the final lines make them feel a shared humanity passing through the moments and terrains she illuminates. These lines encapsulate the entire collection's hope and effect, showing "all earth a quarry, all life a labor, stone-faced, stone-drunk / with a hope that this assemblage of rubble, taken together, would become / a shrine or holy place, an ossuary, immovable and sacred." ❖

Whitney Rio-Ross has a master's degree in religion and literature from Yale Divinity School. She teaches as an adjunct in Nashville, Tenn.



REVEALING AND REVELING

One Long River of Song:
Notes on Wonder,
by Brian Doyle

Little, Brown and Company



“Quiet miracles,” that’s what the late writer Brian Doyle calls them, those moments of wonder so freighted with significance they inscribe themselves upon our hearts. If there is a unifying thread in *One Long River of Song*, a posthumous collection of Doyle’s essays and prose poetry, it is this: Quiet miracles bespot our lives. They are everywhere, if only we have the patience and humility to see them as such.

Consider a shrew or a hummingbird or a can of anchovies clutched to a young boy’s sleeping chest. That’s what Doyle does. He finds miracle and mystery enough to still your heart, bring you to tears, or leave you smirking and smiling in awe. Revealing and reveling in such wonders is what Doyle does best. And he does it time and time again, in short prose poems and essays that rarely run over two pages long.

Doyle won a Catholic Book Award and three Pushcart Prizes, and he was published in a host of publications, including *Best American Essays*, *Best American Spiritual Writing*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and *Harper’s Magazine*. But he will be remembered more for his ability to reveal the marvelous in the seemingly mundane. Speaking of a wonderfully unlikely game of catch he shared with his father some decades before, Doyle wrote, “A moment like that ought to be resurrected regularly, [and] sung for the gift it is.” In essay after essay, that is what Doyle does. He resurrects the quiet miracles in his life so that we might better recognize them in our own. That is his gift to us, and for that we can be thankful. ❧

Jon Little is a freelance writer in Nashville, Tenn. He writes about mindfulness, fatherhood, and faith at mindfuldaddy.com.



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REAPING AND SOWING IN A MINEFIELD

By Mathew J. Andrews



The field, still and breathless,
colored in thirsty hues of yellow,
sits beneath hills just as bleak,
the whole land scoured in disinfectant

and scrubbed clean of stains,
a Lady Macbeth at her basin.
Yet nothing buried stays dormant:
the seeds germinate and expand,

the tendrils pulled up toward sunlight,
until the bursting of ripe fruit
cracks like a distant gunshot,
like blood crying out from the dirt.

Mathew J. Andrews is a private investigator and writer based in Modesto, Calif.

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DREAMING A PROJECT OF FREEDOM

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle A.

By Valerie Bridgeman



Living the Word

Recounting the stories that shape our religious longings happens in the shade of uncertainty and fear. We remain in “Ordinary Time” but are besieged by a global pandemic with fallout the likes

of which we cannot yet know. It would be easy to scapegoat people or to descend into fear. But we are called to live out our faith, even in difficult times—or maybe especially in difficult times.

We know we are constantly being shaped by our histories, in every way. Telling the stories of how we’ve come through in the past and grounding ourselves again in the firm foundation of our faith will, over time, reveal to us how that foundation shaped our lives in this season. It may embolden us to join God’s project of salvation, deliverance, and freedom for all creation. With Christ at the center of our lives, we have a constant invitation to return to the source and to center our lives in God in such a way that we see our responsibility to live, on behalf of this world, in the name of Christ. It pushes us beyond our circles of family and friends and helps us to see a larger connection, deeper relationships. Perhaps if we can get there, we will be able to see our need to repent from our self-absorption. We might be able to see that we are a web of relationships and—just as Moses needed the help of at least five women—that we need one another to survive.

Valerie Bridgeman is dean, vice president of academic affairs, and an associate professor of homiletics and Hebrew Bible at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

WHAT OF ALL THOSE DEAD BOYS?

AUGUST 2

WRESTLING A BLESSING

GENESIS 32:22-31; PSALM 17:1-7, 15;
ROMANS 9:1-5; MATTHEW 14:13-21

In **Genesis 32**, Jacob wrestles a blessing from the man at the river Jabbok, but not without cost. Jacob says he’s seen God face to face (32:30), something Moses would later be told is impossible. There has been much scholarship on whether the man with whom Jacob wrestles is God or an angel. The text is fully ambiguous. But it seems clear that Jacob wrestled in the night because he was afraid to face his past. He feared the coming confrontation with Esau.

I have had internal wrestling matches that have felt like I was in hand-to-hand combat with myself. Lately, I’ve been wondering whether our nation can wrestle with its internal beginnings, with its demons and angels—with its past. Recent events where Black people have died either in vigilante killings, such as Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, or state-sanctioned police killings, such as the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, tell me we still have some communal wrestling to do, in hopes of finding a new name that includes “justice.” Jacob needed to win because from his lineage would come the patriarch from whom came the messiah who “God blessed forever” (Romans 9:5). If people will know God’s blessings, they must find a way to live into what is right for the sake of us all.

AUGUST 9

GLIMPSE GOD’S GRACE

GENESIS 37:1-4, 12-28; PSALM 105:1-6, 16-22, 45; ROMANS 10:5-15;
MATTHEW 14:22-33

I grew up in the Deep South believing in ghosts. When we heard ghost stories, our fear was based in the fact that elders in our lives insisted they had encountered one. When the disciples believe Jesus

walking on the water is a ghost, it makes sense to me. How else could they explain a man walking toward them on a lake, with the winds against them (Matthew 14:24)? They had spent all night in a struggle with those storms. Perhaps they'd concluded that they and everyone around them were doomed. Seeing Jesus coming toward them did not encourage them. The struggle had discouraged them.

Many times, we struggle while believing we have no divine support. Our human efforts exhaust us; fear overtakes us. These feelings seem inevitable when we are struggling with the storms of social inequalities, for example. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "We are all in the same boat now." But Jesus wasn't in the boat with the disciples. He was beyond it. And perhaps that can give us hope and be for us a glimpse of God's grace. In the gospel the storm rages, but faith will steady us, Matthew says. Here, Peter experiences the saving hand of God in Jesus personally. God's invitation to us, personally and communally, is to risk going beyond what we know about safety and to trust Jesus' outstretched hand.

AUGUST 16

'JOSEPHS' AMONG US

GENESIS 45:1-15; PSALM 133;
ROMANS 11:1-2, 29-32; MATTHEW 15:10-28

The passage from Genesis gives us a theological reading of Joseph's life. In this telling, Joseph is clear that he was sent to preserve his family's life—not by the action of his brothers, but by the grace of God (45:5, 8). Perspective helps him not to be bitter. Reconnecting with his family was emotional and fulfilling. Just as there has been joy when people reconnect with family during this pandemic, so too did Joseph shower his kin with tears and kissing (verse 15). Our global health crisis has separated us by death. It also has separated us because we cannot travel beyond our borders or beyond our homes, due to shelter-in-place precautions. We try to make sense of what we face, just as people did during the famine of Joseph's time. Looking back over what had been a hard life in hard times, Joseph was able to see the hand of God.

As we pray for scientists to find ways to lessen the deadly impact of the coro-

navirus, we might look to those who have prepared through their life's call for this moment—scientists, doctors, nurses, chaplains, and other first responders. They are our "Josephs" in this moment. How can we see and honor their gifts, on which we all vitally depend? We owe it to one another to work for a more just world, where none are dependent on the kindness of one person in power. If we had a more equitable medical system and economic system, perhaps our "Josephs" would not need to be extraordinary people.

AUGUST 23

NETWORK OF DELIVERERS

EXODUS 1:8 - 2:10; PSALM 124;
ROMANS 12:1-8; MATTHEW 16:13-20

The Exodus story is a staple in the African American religious imagination, in which we see God as "coming down" to rescue us as a people from an oppressive system. The shrewd midwives, who "fear God," outwit the shrewdness of Pharaoh. The story has been used to encourage faith in God and uprisings for justice. But this story is horrific. The Hebrew people are enslaved; their lives are bitter. But they continue to thrive, even under worsening conditions—such as the decree to kill all boy babies. We want to rush to the women who help thwart Moses' death and celebrate them, but what of all those other dead boys? God saves Moses, but not the rest—and that is sobering.

Today, I continue to be sobered by the people who do not get delivered, who do not escape their oppressor "like a bird from the snare of the fowlers" (Psalm 124:7). If I tell the whole truth, I have wondered more than once this season: Where is the God who delivers? Why does it seem God has not taken up our cause to prevent us

**THE STORM RAGES,
BUT FAITH WILL
STEADY US.**

from being "swallowed up alive" (verse 3)? Exodus says God delivers by providing unlikely leaders—such as midwives, mothers, and sisters—but also by employing the power of the powerful. What if we viewed everyone around us as important? Would it provoke us to join God's project of freedom, deliverance, and thriving for everyone? Would we defy unjust laws for freedom's sake? Could we believe we are all called to this network of deliverers on whom God can count?

AUGUST 30

RADICAL AND SCARY

EXODUS 3:1-15; PSALMS 105:1-6, 23-26,
45; ROMANS 12:9-21; MATTHEW 16:21-28

In a dramatic scene, God calls to Moses in a bush that burns but is not consumed. Moses had no way of knowing what turning aside to see it would mean for his life. Perhaps it was the assurance that God would be with him (Exodus 3:12) or the assurance that this was indeed "the same God" of his ancestors (verse 15) that led Moses to say "yes." He could not know how hard it would be, how much death would ensue, or what his end would be.

Of course, to the people of God, Moses represents God's presence and deliverance, and they would sing of it in the psalms. Psalm 105 is the sung version of the people's memory of liberation. For the people, Moses personified hope. I'm not convinced they were always "patient in suffering," as the writer of Romans instructs (12:12), but certainly they prayed for many years for deliverance. We have no account of them rebelling, though, as the progeny of former slaves, I imagine that they did. But perhaps prayers were their rebellions and their weapon songs. Perhaps they did not avenge themselves, as Romans says, but left "room for the wrath of God" (verse 10). The only way to participate in God's project is by overcoming evil with the good we do. We must be willing to lose our selves in God's vision and be willing to lose our lives for the sake of it. These words are radical and, frankly, scary. Discipleship is costly. ♦

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



ECO-CRANKY

By Ed Spivey Jr.

The least funny thing in the world today is the novel coronavirus. Unless it's how I look breathing through a Brita filter, or opening doors with my feet, or the phrase "under the leadership of this president." But that's not what's getting me down today. (Ask me tomorrow.) I can't stop fretting about climate change. Even though the virus has actually slowed human impact on the environment, I'm not content. And it's showing.

People tell me I'm no fun anymore because I fail to see the silver lining in clouds which, I keep pointing out, would not actually float if they contained metal of any kind. (Nor do they contain stuffed-animal parts, despite often resembling your favorite childhood comfort friend.) Nor do I "walk on the sunny side of the street," since that side is no longer protected by a healthy ozone layer. If apocalypse were a color, I'd be looking at the world through apocalypse-colored glasses. And that glass would be three-quarters empty, not half full. And yes, I'm mixing metaphors, because I like them shaken, not stirred.

The front of my mind may be on the virus, but the back of my mind is on the climate. And it's a small mind, so there's not much distance between the two.

Case in point: A few months ago, a colleague returned from his lunch in a nearby park and reported, "What a beautiful day!" He said this because it was 63 degrees and sunny outside, all the characteristics of burgeoning spring. "But it's FEBRUARY!" I forcefully reminded him, "40 degrees hotter than normal! It is not 'beautiful,' it's terrifying!"

"And it's a portent of things to come," I added, hoping I was using that word correctly, "and I will permit NO sweet talk about it!"

See. I'm just no fun anymore. And that was in the middle of "winter." I'm even worse now. I admit this might not be

WHERE ARE THE WOOLLY MAMMOTHS WHEN YOU NEED THEM?

the best time to raise the climate alarm. According to Fox News, when you complain in the middle of a crisis, you're just politicizing it for partisan advantage. (So, how about thoughts and prayers?)

My climate anxiety was heightened by learning the earth has officially entered a new era of devastation. This one is called the Anthropocene, a human-caused global extinction, and a great name for a hand sanitizer, which they're still out of on Amazon. It means that humans have lived past our freshness date and are no longer useful to the planet. It's time to make way for a species more compatible with nature, like maybe earthworms. Heck, they already share the same genetic code as us, and they aerate the soil much better.

Maybe it's a good thing that dinosaurs were wiped out in an earlier extinction. I wouldn't want them to see what's happening to their world now. These gigantic reptiles would be shocked and saddened by the damage we small mammals have done to the planet, and they'd wonder why woolly mammoths—their natural descendants in the category of extra-large—didn't slow us down when they had the chance. And shame on saber-toothed tigers for not lending a hand. The earth would be better off if we humans had been kept huddling in our caves, even if it meant some of us would never fulfill our potential. "Hey, Bill Gates, it's your turn to forage. And stop harping about 'windows!' We haven't even invented doors yet!"

But we don't live in caves anymore. We live in houses and apartments, waiting for the government to say we can come out and drive our cars again. In the meantime, COVID-19 is giving our warming planet some breathing space, but it shouldn't breathe too close. Even planets should follow CDC guidelines and stay at least six feet apart. (Talking to you, Saturn. Keep those rings to yourself. And do you really need so many?)

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.



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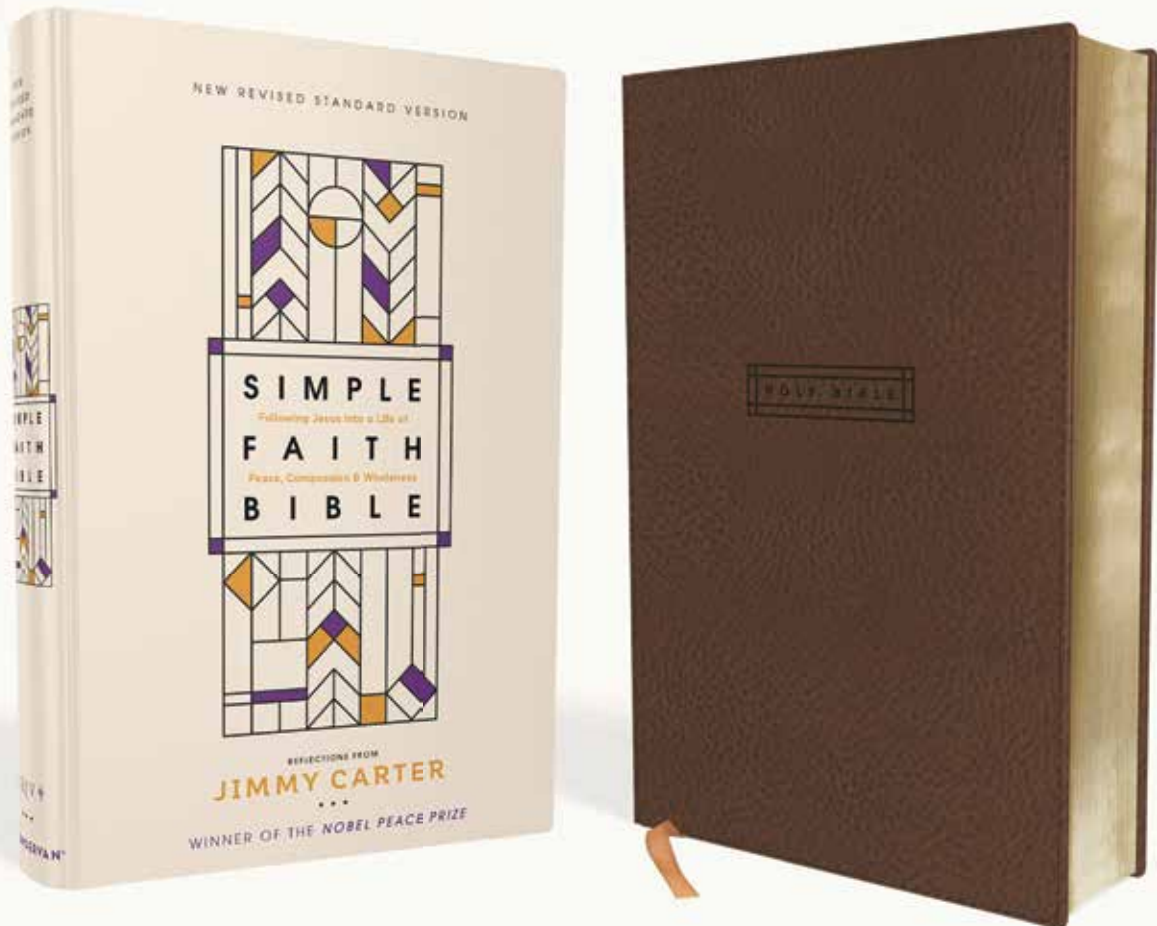
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